Author: Rokurou Akashi
Illustrator: Shiso
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THE WORLD'S LEAST INTERESTING MASTER SWORDSMAN

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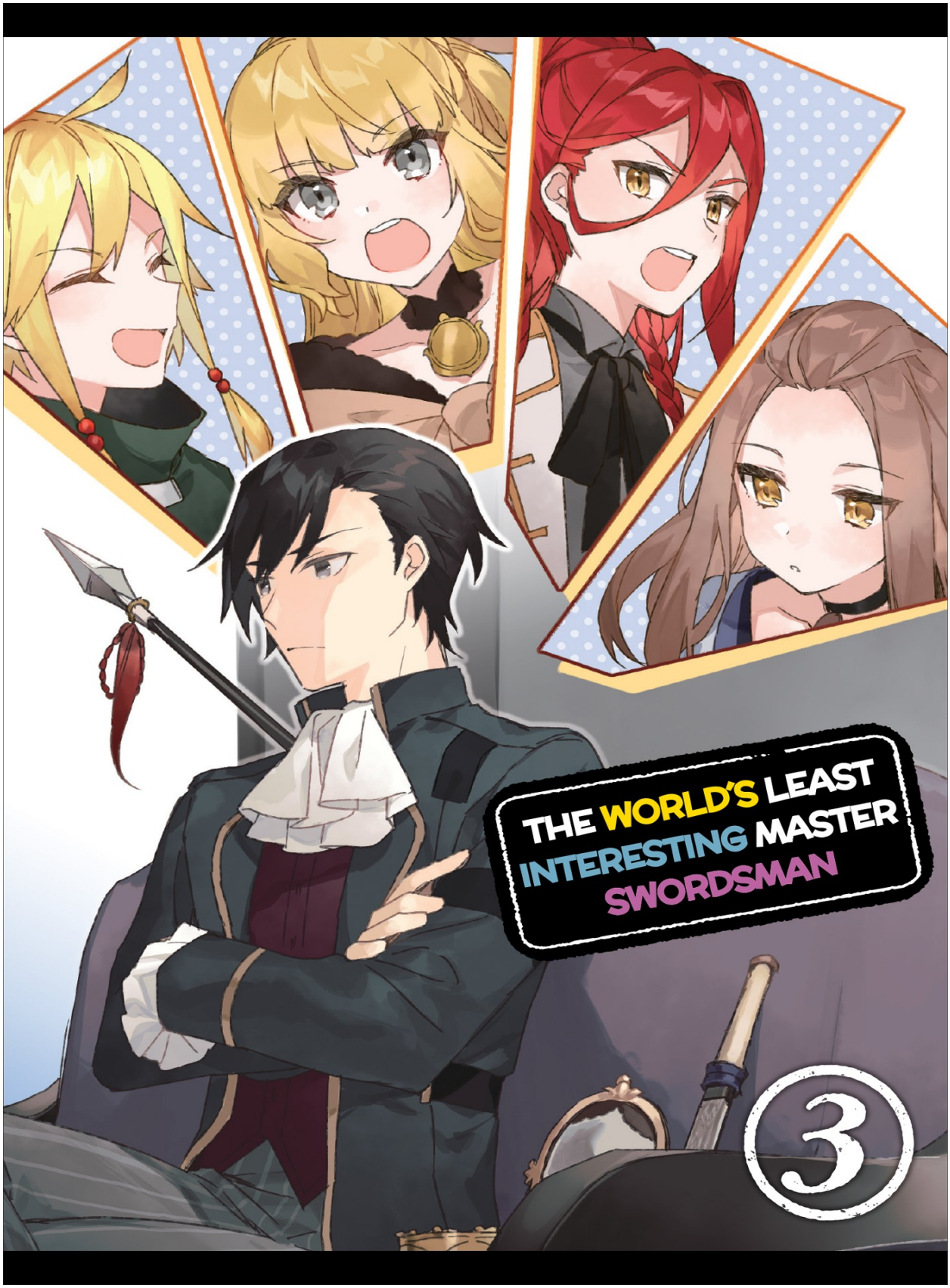
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Prologue — Explanation

“Say, Lady Paulette.”

“You don’t need to add the ‘lady’…”

“I’m not very smart, so I figure it’s better to make it a habit… But anyway, wasn’t the war supposed to be over by now?”

Shouzo’s question referred to the confusion within the Arcana Kingdom. From what he had originally heard, the Arcana Kingdom isn’t supposed to want to continue the war.

“Am I going to end up having to destroy that entire Domino place?”

“Please rest assured that House Caputo is doing everything it can to make sure that doesn’t come to pass.”

Shouzo looked anxious at learning that the war might continue. He fully intended to do as he was told, but it’s not something he particularly relishes.

“If you’d like, I’ll give you a basic summary of the current situation.”

“Please keep it as simple as possible.”

It’s a relatively complicated situation, but if she takes it step-by-step, even Shouzo should be able to understand.

“Our kingdom, Arcana, and the Domino Empire — now the Domino Republic — are neighboring countries of about the same size, so please think of them that way.”

“Okay~”

At the very least he isn’t having any trouble with the concept of countries of similar size. Shouzo could understand those easily enough.

“However, the Domino Empire is heavily depleted from a combination of oppressive policies and a long civil war. To put it simply, they are poor.”

“So they have no money.”

“That is part of it, but the lack of food is a bigger issue. If things are allowed to continue as they currently stand, they will suffer from innumerable deaths by starvation. As such, Domino invaded Arcana to forcibly take our food.”

War is generally something to avoid, of course, but perhaps in this case there wasn’t much choice. Based on Paulette’s explanation, their motives for war weren’t entirely immoral, but neither was it immoral to have defeated their invading army.

“As House Caputo’s lands are on the eastern edge of the Arcana Kingdom, we share a border with Domino. This is why we had you intercept the enemy army.”

“There would have been a serious problem if we hadn’t stopped them.”

“…I’m sorry for pushing such an unpleasant role upon you. Regardless, Domino has lost many of their soldiers, making it impossible for them to wage a war for the purpose of pillaging us.”

“That’s a good point. Since this isn’t a game, people who die stay dead.”

“With this accomplished, the initiative now belongs solely to the Arcana Kingdom. Therefore, our options now are either to demand reparations and enter into a peace treaty or to invade them and gain more than would be possible if we just negotiated.”

In either case, there are advantages and disadvantages, but regardless of the chosen approach, it’s clear that Arcana is guaranteed to win.

“If I was to prioritize the interests of the kingdom as a whole, a negotiated settlement would be best. Thanks to you, Shouzo, we have taken no losses, so there is no concern that we’ll be criticized for not taking revenge, and there’s nothing to be gained from invading a poor country.”

“So there’s really nothing to gain from fighting.”

“That is the reason why the Four Great Houses desire a diplomatic settlement.”

The actual target of the invasion, House Caputo; the martial foundations of the kingdom, House Sepaeda and House Batterabbe; and the House furthest from Domino, House Disaea... All four Great Houses have pushed for negotiations.

“The issue is the Crown. The House of Arcana, the royal family, with their lands at the center of the kingdom, have made clear that they disapprove of settling things as they currently stand.”

“Whyyyy~?”

“...Because they lack a heroic figure of their own.”

“...They want someone with a cheat ability?”

The Young Sword Apostle employed by House Sepaeda, Sansui Shirokuro... Having suffered a setback against him, the Crown has been seeking a means of competing against him ever since.

A man chosen by the Sacred Sword Eckesachs and possessing the talent to use all of the Rare Arts, the heir to House Batterabbe, Saiga Mizu...

House Caputo’s Shouzo Kyoube, ‘the Scarred Fool,’ the world’s most powerful mage, possessing mana far beyond that of the typical individual...

And Shun Ukiyo, ‘the Thinker,’ the man who can use House Disaea’s secretly acquired Armor of Disaster Pandora with no risk...

All of them are special aces rivaling Sansui in ability.

“Ordinarily, that’s not the sort of person you can find simply by searching. However, there is one in Domino... The revolutionary who overthrew the entire corrupt, powerful Domino Empire.”

“What’s he capable of doing?”

“The Eight Sacred Treasures, such as Arcana’s Eckesachs and Pandora? He holds four of them.”

“Wow, that’s impressive~!”

“Yes, it’s quite impressive. It’s not that he himself is powerful, but if they can pull him into their orbit, the Crown would have a heroic individual comparable to those possessed by the Four Great Houses. As such, the Crown is opposed to a settlement at present.”

If they settle things as they stand, it would likely end with the handover of a Sacred Treasure or two. But the Crown wants the man wielding all four treasures.

“However, that is against the kingdom’s interests. There is no possibility of Domino simply handing over their supreme leader and all four Sacred Treasures just because we demanded it. If they were to do that, even if the Arcana Kingdom didn’t destroy them, their other neighbors would do it instead.”

“…So that’s not happening?”

“That’s correct. The only way Domino would accept those conditions would be if the Arcana Kingdom were to hand over an enormous amount of aid, along with all of the exiled nobles who defected.”

“…So that’s still not happening.”

“Yes, that’s right. For the side that got invaded to accept such terms, despite having won, is something the citizens would never accept. Which is why the Four Great Houses were unified in their opposition…”

Which is when information came forth that would make it impossible to reach any kind of settlement under the current circumstances.

“We have learned that the Young Sword Apostle, Master Shirokuro Sansui… his adopted daughter, Miss Lain, may be related to Domino’s Emperor… That is, to put it simply, she may be a member of the Imperial House.”

“…What happens if that ends up being true?”

“That revolutionary may try to assassinate Miss Lain.”

The reason that Sansui Shirokuro, who had spent many years holed up deep in the woods, had journeyed to the mortal world and accepted employment with House Sepaeda, was solely for the purpose of raising Lain.

If there is an attempt on Lain’s life, or, Heaven forbid, that attempt was to succeed, there is no telling what Sansui would do, even considering his employment by House Sepaeda.

“…Wait, wait, surely he’s not going to do that. I mean, Lain’s been raised by Sansui since she was a baby, right? It’s not like she ever did anything as a member of the Imperial House, and it might not even be true!”

“One of the Eight Sacred Treasures, the Demon Blade of Vengeance, Dainsleif… That weapon’s ability, triggered by the wielder’s thirst for revenge, is said to suck the blood out of those it wounds and then find those related to that target.”

Hearing that, Shouzo falls silent. It’s possible that Lain would be killed simply for being related to the Imperial House.

“The Arcana Kingdom, to protect Miss Lain, must find a way to make the wielder of the Demon Blade give up his desire for vengeance.”

“Can’t you just make that one of the terms for the settlement?”

“Even if it’s made one of the conditions, it’s not clear he would actually give up on killing Miss Lain. It’s possible he would still send in assassins covertly.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”
“We do what the Crown wants. Make an ally of Domino’s chief rebel.”

Chapter 1 — The Nobles of a Fallen Empire

Part 1 — Negotiations

“Your Highness! What are your thoughts on this subject?”

“Hari, you seem rather agitated. You have the air of a warrior facing the enemy.”

The emigre noble, Hari, raises her voice to Setenve Arcana. The princess herself is calm; at the very least, she doesn’t seem particularly bothered by the outcome.

“We appreciate your help. That much is true. We find this information to be extremely valuable.”

“...No doubt you are aware of what we truly desire. Please, provide your aid for us to restore the Empire!”

The earnest desire of the nobles that have escaped to Arcana and those biding their time within Domino’s lands... For them, there is nothing other than the restoration of their fallen Empire and returning to their ancestral lands.

“I see.”

There was no need to reiterate such a thing. Setenve is treating Hari rather coolly, but she does, in fact, appreciate the information. That is to say, she appreciates the information, but she also has no intention of going along with Hari’s plan.

“It is, indeed, possible to restore power to your Imperial House. With House Caputo’s ace, there’s no army in the world that could stop him.”

“Yes, that’s right. If you can lend him to us, it would be a simple matter to wipe out the rebels.”

Although sheltering in House Caputo territory, Hari hadn’t realized that there was such a powerful monster lurking nearby. In addition to her shock, she had celebrated when she had learned about his power, and she wasn’t alone. The hated rebels had been destroyed by divine punishment. Along with a sense of catharsis, they felt hope welling up inside them. The new regime was now a mere paper tiger and the emigres were now convinced that their restoration to power was now just a matter of time.

“That is possible, certainly. Then what?”

“We would then raise the child Lain as the new Emperor and restore the Empire!”

“That isn’t a problem. But again, then what?”

Setenve coolly identifies the issue, throwing cold water on Hari’s certainty that they’ll defeat the rebel army.

“With the power of a man like that, a man who is divine punishment incarnate, you render any tactics meaningless. It wouldn’t matter whether they hole up in a fortress or a city; he could wipe it off the map.”

“Yes!”

“But what do you intend to do after? Allow me to state it bluntly: he won’t solve your fundamental problem. How do you intend to address that?”

Solving the food shortage... The shortage was the root cause of everything wrong with Domino. Even the new regime was struggling to solve the issue, despite having deposed the old regime. Indeed, not only are they struggling, but the issue is getting worse.

“W-We would also request your aid for that issue, as well!”

“I see...”

“We are neighbors. We have long mixed and mingled throughout our history! Please, we ask for the greatest possible aid.”

“So, you admit you have no intention of solving the problem on your own.”

Setenve is well aware of the emigre nobles and their problems. Even setting aside her opinion about their worth, vis-a-vis them being beaten curs, she also has a clear idea of their qualitative value. She’s well aware that they lack the power to rebuild their country or, for that matter, even the power to raise an army of their own.

“You could certainly put down the ‘rebel’ army if we were to lend you the Scarred Fool. If we were to provide you with sufficient food, then you would be able to restore the Empire. But what do we gain in exchange?”

“Certainly, once the Empire is restored, we will repay the debt in the long-term. Think of the help we can provide militarily! Please consider the possibilities in a century, or two centuries!”

Well, that might be the case. It’s certainly true that it might be possible to recover the costs in the medium or long term, even if it resulted in a short-term loss. However, Hari doesn’t seem aware that her words are hollow.

“Then tell me, how much of a difference is there between that and our kingdom demanding reparations from the current regime, or obtaining favorable military and economic terms, in the resulting treaty?”

“...There is no comparison, Your Highness! They are rebels! You have seen how they think! They have gone so far as to raise their hands against your kingdom!”

“True, but they are no longer a threat to us. We have no need to fight the current regime.”

If war is a matter of economics, and if providing reinforcements is a form of investment, then the returns on that investment can be quantified. Even if there isn’t any real cost incurred by defeating the current regime, and even if there’s no foreseeable downside, it’s still not worth doing if there’s no foreseeable return.

“Do you mean to abandon us? To accept the rebel as Domino’s rightful sovereign?!”

“That is entirely up to you. If you can find terms that are better than peace with the current regime, we will consider them. Although, I would hope such a proposal wouldn’t be a mere empty promise.”

What she is demanding is for the emigres to produce some form of collateral. Something that would be worth the effort required of the Arcana Kingdom to do as they ask.

“Consider that the consensus of not only the Crown and His Majesty, but of the entire kingdom.”

“H-How… How can a king think in such a way?!” Hari reacts with anger at the conservative, even timid words from Setenve. It made clear that there was a substantial gap in the thinking being done by the two sides.

“How can the royals who command a kingdom behave so timidly?”

“That statement is coming from someone used to the autocratic rule of the old empire. In our kingdom, while they are not quite our equals, we do have four Great Houses, and their lords have influence and authority that rival the Crown’s.”

House Caputo has an ace capable of destroying an army, and employed it openly against the invading forces. As such, Hari believes that their ace should be placed under the command of the crown. She believes this because, in her former country, the Crown commanded absolute authority.

“Our first priority is seeing to the kingdom’s interests, of course, but we must also tend to our own territories, and as such, the Great Houses tend to be last on our list. The Four Great Houses operate under similar logic regarding their own interests. In that sense, House Caputo’s actions are perfectly appropriate. If we were to demand that they hand over the Scarred Fool, they are likely to refuse, and the other three Great Houses are likely to support them.”

“Ridiculous! Who else but the Crown should control that sort of power?! To leave a force unattended that could destroy your realms at a whim, is that not the height of folly?! Do you want to repeat the failures of our empire?! Power that can destabilize the state must all be controlled by the state!”

Hari’s words are, to some extent, correct. Certainly, Shouzo Kyoube possesses the power to destroy an entire country, and that power is possessed not by the Crown, but rather by a powerful noble house. It’s an absurd state of affairs and poses the constant risk of a coup d’etat. However, that’s only true when viewed through the lens of the Empire’s political calculus.

“…Tell me, ‘child.’ Do you have no conception of learning from others’ mistakes, or even your own?”

It’s not the face of disappointment. Disappointment only exists if there was already an expectation of anything better. One can’t be disappointed by someone they expect nothing from in the first place. All she’s doing is dealing with someone she’s considered a dead loss from the beginning.

“Explain yourself, please!”

“There are people on whom you can use force to garner obedience and those you cannot. I’m asking you if you still haven’t learned that lesson.”

It’s true that Shouzo is content to be House Caputo’s ace. But that’s different from whether or not he’d be content to be the Crown’s ace.

“There are individuals in this world who are far beyond the ordinary. Those people have the right to choose their masters, and those masters must build trust with them accordingly.”

“Do you mean to say that the Crown lacks the power to control him?!”

“That’s what I keep telling you, isn’t it, you fool? How do you not grasp this simple fact?”

It’s their choice to believe that people will obey when ordered to do so. However, the reason Hari’s country collapsed is because they were unable to actually execute on that particular idea.

“House Caputo has him well controlled. Even though he possesses the power to destroy the kingdom whenever he pleases, he’s given them the authority to control how it’s used. Which is why they have shown him to the public. They’re showing that they’ve got complete control over the Scarred Fool.”

The ace is their retainer and, so long as they don’t betray him, he won’t betray them. That is an understanding shared by all four of the Great Houses. Even the most dangerous of the four aces, the Thinker, Shun Ukiyo, is understood as being loyal to House Disaea. The Crown shares that understanding. The Four Great Houses can handle these individuals who are capable of destroying the kingdom. They’re certain of that fact.

“The ruler’s commands are absolute and all will obey. Those that disobey will be punished. That you had such blind faith in that truth is why your country no longer exists.”

“Then… Are you content to allow one of the Four Great Houses, House Caputo, to have greater influence than the Crown?!”

“Of course we’re not content. But it’s irrelevant when compared to the broader interests of the kingdom.”

House Sepaeda possesses the greatest swordsman, Sansui Shirokuro; House Batterabbe possesses the universal arts wielder, Saiga Mizu; and House Caputo possesses the world’s most powerful mage, Shouzo Kyoube. Each House possesses an absolute power that the Crown does not. House Disaea’s Shun Ukiyo, though not yet publicly revealed, fills a similarly important role.

The Crown is the only house that lacks such an ace. Both the king and Setenve are not pleased with that fact, which is why they want to draw in Domino’s current ruler. However, that desire is still constrained by the limits of the kingdom’s interests.

“Daughter of a fallen empire, you’re mistaken. Why? Because your empire has fallen.”

The Crown is certainly not happy that its influence is limited. But even then, they’re still better off than emigre nobles like the one standing before Setenve, and much better off than the Imperial House, which is presently being hunted by the new regime. The Empire fell because they put the

sovereign’s interests first. That’s the real story behind the fall of the old regime.

“That’s not true! The Empire fell because a man with four of the Sacred Treasures got the idea in his head to destroy our country…”

“So long as you believe that, you will certainly fail, no matter how many times your regime is restored. No matter how much support we provide, your state will continue to destroy itself.”

In theory, if Shouzo or Sansui were the enemy, then there was no fair outcome to that fight. Even the Arcana Kingdom would fall if facing a mage powerful enough to destroy an entire country or a swordsman that no one could contain.

However, the citizens of Domino support the current regime, even though the change in the country’s political system hasn’t solved the problems plaguing it. Still, the citizens were dissatisfied with the country’s previous rulers, and they don’t seem to want them back.

“The real problem underlying civil war isn’t that one individual started that conflict. The actual cause is, in fact, a lack of control.”

“You are saying that we bear responsibility for the civil war?! That the rulers, not the rebels, are at fault?! What does it mean to be supported by subjects who cannot grasp the big picture?! In the end, they fell under the influence of those who claimed all would be solved simply by defeating us! The same people who then decided to invade this kingdom!”

That, too, is true. It would be fair to describe the current regime as one that has failed to deliver after making convenient promises to its citizens. There’s no guarantee that a successful revolution will lead to a successful government, after all, and it is, in fact, not working out well at present.

“The big picture, mm? Then, I would like you to think from our perspective and consider the big picture. Which do you think is greater? What we stand to gain by supporting you, or what we avoid losing if we cut you loose?”

“That’s…”

“I won’t say that your political system is without merit. However, your inability to maintain that system led to your empire’s fall. It’s hard to believe those who failed to govern their own country will ever be able to pay their debts.”

“…”

“In the end, the only way to judge whether or not you’ve successfully governed is whether or not you have the support of your people. The success of a rebellion is proof that your populace is unhappy with your rule and have put their hopes in the idea of having a new ruler.”

The new regime had lost the war, and no matter how much they might try, they certainly won’t be able to demand money or food from the Arcana Kingdom. However, all they’ve done so far is lose a war, and their state is still intact. The true test of their ability is whether or not they can maintain that state.

“If I’m to offer you further advice… Give up your hopes of rallying your people around Lain. House Sepaeda is not the only power protecting that girl. The Lightning Slasher is raising that child of his own volition. Even if you trot out her origins now, no doubt that man won’t allow you to use his daughter as a figurehead.”

“Lightning… Slasher?”

“House Sepaeda’s ace, Sansui Shirokuro. Your father has witnessed his fighting, I believe.”

House Caputo’s ace would be relatively easy to kill, if it proved necessary. However, House Sepaeda’s ace isn’t one that can be so easily disposed of. As such, it’s completely impossible for the emigre nobles to drag out Lain as their figurehead without his approval.

“…I’ve heard he’s powerful, but he’s still a mere swordsman, yes? I can’t believe that House Sepaeda would provide him with enough support that he would be able to refuse the Crown’s demands…”

“I don’t mean to repeat myself. However, allow me to be clear. He has that support, and no one else in this kingdom doubts that. Unlike your lot.”

Part 2 — Value

If there is one thing the emigre nobles do well, it's gathering information. At the very least, they had discovered that a survivor of the Imperial House was in Sansui's care. The next step for them was to gather information on Sansui and prepare their arguments to convince him.

Of course, the results of their investigations were so hopeless as to leave them with an intense feeling of frustration.

"An Immortal who has lived for over five hundred years... A swordsman without hunger or lust, who has been working to master his art since before the founding of our empire..."

Just how are they supposed to draw a man like that into their orbit? It's hard to believe he has any relatives or even a homeland left. Indeed, it's hard to believe he'd spent five hundred years training if he ever had any attachment to that homeland. He picked up a child deep within the woods, and he left the woods to raise that child. Moreover, by most standards, he's already at the apex of what it means to be a warrior.

Serving as the bodyguard of the daughter of a great martial house, living at her estate, being betrothed in all but name to a noblewoman also employed by House Sepaeda, and having recently gained permission to take apprentices of his own...

When Hari made the effort to check with her own bodyguard, she received the obvious answer that he 'couldn't imagine a better environment.'

"Even then... Even then, we have to convince him..."

Hari and her bodyguards have gone to visit Sansui. He's currently instructing a group of extremely tough looking men outside the academy.

"Hyah!"

"You're too tense. Avoid putting unnecessary strength into your swing."

"Yes, sir!"

"Your swing is getting sloppy. Try to maintain the same arc for your first, middle, and final swings."

It seems to be very ordinary instruction, having the apprentices practice their swings like this. It did seem a bit odd to have a small child to be instructing such tough looking adults, but the content of the instruction was completely ordinary.

For someone who had seen the 'claw marks' left by the world's most powerful mage, the simplicity of the man in front of her leaves her with a feeling she can't quite put her finger on. She had certainly expected something like this before coming here, but as someone with no training in the sword, the sight before her doesn't look particularly impressive.

"Still... The reality is that he is the greatest swordsman and the guardian of House Sepaeda's princess. We have no choice but to convince him."

She has no intention of underestimating him, of course. It's simply that she doesn't understand what makes him impressive, or how he could have

such incredible ability that even the princess of Arcana admits he has the right to make his own decisions.

In which case, she must do whatever it takes to gain his cooperation in retaking her homeland. Having waited for him to finish his lesson, she chooses to approach him as he spends time with Lain. Evidently aware of her presence from the start, he shows no sign of surprise as Hari walks over with her retinue in tow. He does, however, look a bit apprehensive at her approach.

“Pardon me, Master Sansui. My name is Hari, and I am a noble of the Domino Empire.”

“A pleasure, ma’am. I am Sansui Shirokuro.”

“I would first like to apologize for my father’s actions. I’m told he caused problems for you and your apprentice, Tahlan.”

It doesn’t take a great deal of insight to realize that Sansui’s first impression of emigre nobles had been as bad as it possibly could have been. Even if her father had been threatened by a hex, he had revealed far too much in front of such moral people. Of course, the real issues were that he hadn’t admitted fault until threatened with a hex, and that he had tried to make use of a fair duel to assassinate Tahlan.

Either of those things would have been more than enough reason to dislike someone. Even so, she still has to gain his cooperation, which even she admits is likely to be extremely difficult.

“That matter has been settled, so please don’t let it trouble you.”

“I appreciate your generous response… Lady Lain, are you aware of your origins?”

“…Papa, this lady scares me.”

“It’s alright. I’m right here.”

She feels a tinge of irritation at the heir to the Imperial throne calling him ‘Papa.’ However, he’s also the one who saved her from being eaten by wolves while she was alone in the forest. If he has been fulfilling his responsibilities as her adopted father, then that’s not something they can do anything about.

Lain has grown up without want or need, thanks largely to House Sepaeda. While Sansui’s attire is one thing, seeing that Lain is clothed impeccably by this kingdom’s standards is enough to make that clear. Even if he wasn’t aware of it at the time, he has provided her with an upbringing worthy of a member of the Imperial House. It’s more than enough from a temporary parent.

“We have heard about Lain’s origins. That she is a member of the Imperial House of the Domino Empire.”

“Yes, that’s correct. And she is our last and best hope.”

Unlike the King of Arcana, the Domino Emperor possessed incredible power and authority. Without a member of the Imperial House, even the depleted ranks of the emigre nobles are nearly impossible to coordinate.

They’re incapable of acting organizationally without someone to stand over them.

“Master Shirokuro Sansui... We would like you to stand up and punish the rebels on behalf of Lady Lain and the Imperial nobility.”

It’s true that the emigre nobles are being protected by the Arcana Kingdom and that, if things were to continue as they are now, they are likely to marry members of the Arcana nobility and be integrated into Arcanian society.

That would be an easy life in its own way, and no doubt the wealth they escaped with would last them that long, but those are the thoughts of a beaten people. The nobles don’t consider themselves beaten, and they cannot stand the idea of other people running their country.

“I’m afraid that I can’t...”

“Your opinion is valued by the Four Great Houses, and even by the Crown. If you were to state that the rebels must be defeated, then no doubt the sleeping giant will awaken.”

“While I hate to disappoint you...Lain... Well, while she has received a certain amount of education, she isn’t prepared to be a leader.”

“As for that, please rest assured, that we will support her as her regent!”

Obviously, they won’t have a young girl of five set policy or lead armies. There will, of course, be nobles with experience to cover for anything she might lack. Such a state of affairs wasn’t unusual in the history of the Empire. The role they wanted her to fulfill was more akin to a figurehead that they could rally around.

“Regent...”

“No doubt you are thinking the worst. Please rest assured that we do not ask for the sake of our own ambition. All we care about is the good of the Empire and, by extension, the good of this kingdom.”

She seems to be speaking honestly. While she might think she has no sinister motives, she still has every intention of exploiting Lain for her own benefit. If Domino remains in the hands of the rebels, then she believes that, in the end, her country will be ruined. Thinking objectively, they will almost certainly try to invade this kingdom again. Then, having been sapped of its strength, the other countries will descend on it like vultures. As a member of the Imperial nobility, she feels duty-bound to prevent this from coming to pass.

“I see...”

“Please, lend us your strength!”

“I am merely a bodyguard serving House Sepaeda, and whatever her origins, Lain is still just my daughter. Even if the new regime targets her bloodline, that is all that is. A matter of blood. At the very least, House Sepaeda will not accept Lain as the new emperor.”

He was correct in this. It wasn’t just House Sepaeda at the very least, either; in fact, all four of the Great Houses viewed the prospect of making

Lain emperor with little favor. All of them had agreed that there was no real benefit for the kingdom in doing so.

“And you can simply accept that?! Lady Lain, who should be the recipient of the highest regard from the subjects of the Empire, will instead just be a nobleman’s bride?!”

“She could have been eaten by wolves, and if the Empire was intact when that happened, no one would have so much looked in her direction, no?”

“Th-That’s…”

“I’m content with the life Lain currently leads, and I have no particular issues with her future.”

Hari wishes to negotiate, but Sansui’s Immortal disinterest makes that difficult.

“If you wish to preserve your honor as a member of the Imperial nobility, then you should work to retake your country using your own strength, rather than relying upon a girl raised among another kingdom’s nobility, yes?”

“If we could do that…”

“If you cannot do that, then you ought to let go of that ambition. Desiring things you cannot obtain is folly.”

If looks could kill, Hari would have murdered Sansui with her eyes on the spot. But as they can’t, Sansui calmly lets it go.

If this was the old Empire, it would have been unthinkable for a commoner to go against the wishes of a noble. Whatever steps she was to take to correct the situation, well, no doubt she’d be forgiven by the authorities. But that authority, too, had vanished along with the Empire. Hari has the presence of mind to accept that she currently has no authority. If she was to cause a problem, then she and her fellow emigres would be the ones singled out for punishment. The only option available to her is to plead to Sansui.

“I suppose from your perspective as an Immortal, our problems must seem minor to you. No doubt you can simply dismiss the rightful rulers of a country being displaced as a concern of the mortal world, yes?”

“There is no such thing as a rightful ruler of a territory. No doubt your ancestors took ownership of your lands from the previous ‘rightful rulers,’ yes? I’m not dismissing it as a minor issue. It’s simply a part of the natural order.”

Ultimately, they’d just lost a battle for territory. Like an animal that had lost such a battle, they would have to suffer the inevitable consequences, to one degree or another. That was only natural, and that’s why both humans and animals value their territory. Sure, it’s only natural for those who lost their territory to want it back… But that doesn’t make them special.

“Lady Lain has a responsibility! A responsibility to lead the nobility as a member of the Imperial House!”

“In which case, did you not have a responsibility to fight to the last for the Emperor? When you lose again, what guarantee is there that you won’t abandon Lain and escape to another country?”

“As you are aware, this kingdom possesses the ultimate mage, a mage powerful enough to incinerate an entire kingdom! There’s no possibility that we can lose!”

“Do you wish to burn down ‘your’ country in order to save it? Based on what you have said, I cannot see how you have the ability to support Lain as her regent once she is installed as emperor. As you aren’t able to do anything for her, I would ask that you not make grandiose demands.”

While gently reassuring Lain, who is on the verge of tears, Sansui walks away from Hari.

“What do you know?! What would you know of our feelings?! What would you know of our struggles as we were forced to abandon our homes?! There’s no way for you to understand what we felt when we were forced to flee before the absolute, unjust power of the Sacred Treasures!”

“I fully understand your position just by seeing your faces. You’re throwing a tantrum because you’ve convinced yourself that your every desire is paramount, and you’re not getting your way.”

And this is how the negotiations end in complete failure, with essentially zero possibility of reopening them.

“For you to regain control of the Empire, you have no choice but to rely heavily upon this kingdom. And as depleted as it is, Domino cannot return the aid it receives. That, of course, goes for you personally, as well.”

“We will, of course, offer a reward appropriate to your efforts! It will be on a national level, over the course of the next century! Unlike those rebels, no doubt we will repay this debt!”

“You speak of a national scale, but all you are truly doing is trying to force your descendents to repay the debts that you incur. You are unable to do anything yourself, so you push a reckless debt onto your children. I cannot think that is something a good parent would ever do for a child.”

Seeing him walk off after making that statement, and rather enjoying the sight of Hari now that she’s been rejected, House Sepaeda’s beautiful daughter allows herself a wicked smile.

Part 3 — Simple

The emigre nobles had a secret, or not-so-secret, hope: that a war between the Arcana Kingdom and the Domino Republic would solve all their problems. The Domino Republic has a food shortage, and since that cannot be solved with the resources available within its own borders, there was a high probability that they'd end up invading this kingdom.

Further, they were well aware that their subjects hated them. They ascribed this to a general tendency of rulers always being disliked by their subjects. Of course, plenty of them believed that their 'foolish subjects' had rebelled against them, their 'proper rulers.'

"This is completely different from what we expected."

Nuri, who had recently caused the issue with Tahlan, had believed that once the Domino Republic declared war upon the Arcana Kingdom, that the Arcana Kingdom would then invade and restore the Domino Empire. After all, he believed, the very ideology of a republic was a threat to the Arcana Kingdom as well, and they would want to put that genie back into the bottle as quickly as possible.

"The fact that it didn't end up a real war is one thing, but so is the fact that those weaklings in House Caputo had that much power."

And ordinarily, while there might have been differences in scale, it should have ended up that way. House Caputo's ace, an enormously powerful individual that by their presence alone can guarantee victory... Unlike Sansui, the Scarred Fool's immense power is easy to comprehend.

"If we can bring that mage under our influence, we have nothing to fear. We'll not have to bend the knee to anyone!"

He's right about that. Shouzo's personality and his personal skill are both irrelevant. Simply having him would be enough to keep any country from invading them *and* force the rebels to kneel before them. Anyone else's individual desires were meaningless next to his destructive ability.

"Kyoube Shouzo... We must make him ours!"

To restore his lost glory, Nuri has been scheming. Scheming to place the world's most powerful mage under his control. Finding him was simple enough. Shouzo was being kept far from any trade lanes and empty of any valuable resources, in an empty territory remarkable solely for the sheer distance from other people it offered. A single house sits alone on an isolated stretch of land...that's where Shouzo is.

Seeing that they had relegated him to such simple lodgings, Nuri's face curls into a twisted smile. Why? Because it's obvious to anyone who cares to look that Shouzo is being treated badly. It's as though they're just begging for the emigre nobles to recruit him.

If House Caputo had offered him the very best hospitality they could muster, even the emigre nobles wouldn't have been able to provide him with anything better. But as he's living in such squalid conditions, no doubt throwing him even the littlest bone will please him. No doubt he'll

immediately pledge his loyalty to the nobles and happily throw away his life for them. After all, he's being treated like a slave.

"May I ask who you are?"

Of course, there are guards stationed there. There's an entire unit assigned to guard Shouzo operating out of a barracks a little distance away from the house.

"I am Nuri, a nobleman of the Empire. I have business with the man inside."

"You will not pass here! Please leave immediately!"

In addition to knights capable of using ordinary magic, there were also paladins of House Caputo skilled in mystical defense. Nuri has his retinue with him, but they probably can't force their way through *that*.

"Don't you dare impede us! Are mere paladins going to get in the way of an Imperial noble?"

To him, the most important thing he has is the status he was born with, and he can't forgive that another kingdom's knights wouldn't obey him.

Why are there even guards here?

His rage puts such ridiculous thoughts into his head.

"Huh, what? Why?"

Shouzo sticks his head out the door from the house without much in the way of caution. He might have been cautious if it had devolved into combat, but the argument only seems to have piqued his curiosity.

"Please don't do anything!"

The guards hurriedly shove Shouzo back into the house. Even if the visitors aren't planning to assassinate him, there's nothing good that can come from letting them interact with him.

"I mean, it doesn't look like there's a battle..."

"That's not the issue!"

"Seems like they're here to see me, too."

"Just...please, don't do anything."

"...Okay, then. I'll just wait here."

Because of the urgency in the guard's voice, he backs down. Seems he's smart enough to do that, at least.

However, he's the only one who backs down.

"Please depart!"

"We can't just leave after coming all this way!"

There's no way Nuri would ever back down, and the guards are even more motivated to hold their ground. After all, they're fighting over a bomb capable of wiping out entire countries. The sheer value makes it impossible for either side to give in.

"We cannot let you pass!"

"Why not?!"

"We have orders from the Lord of House Caputo and the Lord Marshal of the Paladins!"

"Fine! How much do you want?"

“No matter how much you offer, you’re not getting through!”

No one can say with certainty that all knights, paladins included, are uniformly honorable. The truth is, most wouldn’t want to protect the Scarred Fool. If they had to guard someone, they’d prefer to guard Paulette.

However, having witnessed Shouzo’s power, they were all very aware of what exactly it was that they were protecting. In the worst case, should they slacken their protection, the kingdom could very well end up a burnt-out wasteland. To hand him over now means handing over the power to destroy the kingdom.

“We’ve been given permission to kill intruders who approach without permission!”

“How dare you threaten me?!”

“Now, please leave!”

The permission to kill was decisive.

“Very well... But you will regret this!”

He would have preferred to convince him without interacting with House Caputo, but that had failed. In which case, he decided to wait for another day. And then...

At the eastern edge of the Caputo realms, a distance away from the fortress city, Nuri stands waiting for Shouzo.

“Hm?”

“A pleasure to meet you. My name is Nuri. I am an Imperial noble.”

Shouzo appears at the same site for his magic practice nearly every day. After learning that information, Nuri arrived first to wait for him. Of course, both of them have their escorts along, but the situation allows for some conversation. Consequently, the negotiations began almost immediately. Reality made it impossible to delay for pleasantries.

“I wish to speak to you.”

“Yes?”

“No doubt you have your complaints with House Caputo?”

“Not at all.”

“I understand that you can’t say them in front of your escorts or, rather, your jailors, but you can’t honestly say that you have no complaints.”

“Nope, got none.”

“There’s no way you’re satisfied with being trapped in that squalid hut and being treated so poorly.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you believe you’re entitled to better as the world’s most powerful mage.”

“...What should I do? This guy’s not listening to me.”

At Nuri’s complete lack of understanding at Shouzo’s three answers in the negative, both Shouzo and his escorts are at a loss.

“You have enormous value. With your absolute power, there’s nothing in the world you can’t do.”

Power is authority, true. If they'd had power, Nuri and the others wouldn't have needed to flee to the Arcana Kingdom. And in front of him is a power that no one can do anything to oppose. It was only natural that he'd reach out for it.

"No, I don't think that's true, either."

Shouzo answers without artifice. If 'magic' in this world was that all powerful, he wouldn't have the problems he currently has.

"The only thing I can do is destroy. I can't do anything else."

"But that's something only you can do. In which case, you shouldn't be treated the way you are now. You should be a hero. Why are you satisfied with living trapped in a house like that?"

"Because if I lived in a big mansion, I might blow it up."

Even Nuri couldn't help but pause at this answer. The proof that backs those words is, after all, right next to him.

"See, I've destroyed that house five, six times already. Like, I was dozing one time and thought 'hey, it's cold,' and just a few seconds later it was all on fire. Another time, I figured it was a bit stuffy inside, so I tried a little wind magic and blew it away over the horizon."

The escorts cringe, because it's all true. While he might be capable of producing the overall effect he wants, he has some real difficulty with issues of proportion. In fact, every spell he uses is, by definition, disproportionate.

"If I were in a big mansion, I'd have to live my life on pins and needles. And if I lived in a city, I figure I might destroy everything around me by mistake."

"I, I see…"

If he hadn't witnessed this landscape, no doubt he would have offered to provide particularly tough housing or castles. But Nuri doesn't have the heart to make that offer after seeing this wasteland, because there's no brick or mortar that can stop this man's magic.

"Anyway, that's why I don't feel comfortable living anywhere but in that house."

The huge assumption that served as the foundation of Nuri's case collapses immediately. He had just blithely assumed that Shouzo was poorly treated and as a result, a simple promise of better treatment would easily tip him to Nuri's side. All of the sweet words Nuri had prepared have all been rendered pointless. However, he's not so easily dissuaded that this would be enough to make him give up.

"I understand. However… Don't you wish to use your power for a good purpose?"

"Huh?"

Evidently, that caught his attention, and now he's clearly interested.

"Currently, this kingdom is trying to end the war. It's taking actions to that effect."

"Yeah, I've heard."

"And you're fine with that?"

Those with power all have their desire to wield it. Whether that's power in the form of physical strength, or authority, or overwhelming magic, it doesn't make a difference.

"We, the Imperial nobility, are moving to take back our homeland. If you joined us, we'd give you all the opportunities you could desire to use your power."

"Which means..."

"Yes. Use your magic, your divine punishment, to bring justice to the rebels!"

Just as Sansui has the nickname 'Lightning Slasher,' Shouzo has been tagged with 'Divine Punishment.'

As the name suggests, it's a nearly god-like power that rains down from the heavens. However, it also has the connotation of punishing rebels or invaders.

"So you mean, you want me to blow away your homeland?"

"Yes, but there's no issue. It's not as though you taint the land when you use your magic, is it? The cities and the castles, they were all built by our ancestors. We simply rebuild them after reclaiming our birthright. Is that not the way of the world?"

Originally, the infrastructure in that country was all built for the Imperial House and the nobility. The rebels are making use of that infrastructure, and that's reason enough to destroy it.

"No way."

Shouzo rejects Nuri, clearly displeased.

"I can't trust you. So I won't help you retake your country."

"H-How dare you speak to me that way?! I'm a glorious member of the Imperial nobility! And here I'm offering to hire you!"

"As I'm trying to tell you, I don't want to."

It's true that you can rebuild what you destroy. And even if you kill people, the population will eventually recover. Being from Japan, Shouzo is well aware of how resilient people are.

"H-How... How dare you refuse me! What issue could you possibly have?!"

"I've got issues with all of it. I don't like the fact that you're trying to get me to attack your own country, and I particularly don't like the fact you're so glib about just rebuilding whatever I destroy."

Even things destroyed beyond repair can be replaced. Workers who are killed can also be replaced by new workers. However, building new things and overcoming the grief of losing a loved one are hardly simple things to do.

Shouzo looks contemptuously at Nuri, a man who's trying to boil down these complex issues into something idiotically simple. He had no intention of lending his power to a man who, like himself, could do nothing but destroy.

“The reason I leave my magic in the hands of House Caputo is because they understand the difficulty of protecting people and the difficulty of fixing things. I don’t necessarily believe that they’re all good people, but I think they’re all doing their best for the people of Caputo. You don’t care at all, do you, about the people of your country?”

If they were truly saintly people, they wouldn’t have ever ordered Shouzo to kill anyone. But the reason they had ordered Shouzo to kill wasn’t because they were evil or selfish. They asked it of him after struggling with their consciences and coming to the conclusion that it was the only way to protect their territory and their people. No matter how stupid he might be, Shouzo understands that reality.

“How dare you!”

“Look at this. What I ‘created.’ You intend to leave your entire country this way, right?”

The landscape created by a mage with power beyond belief, with magic from beyond this world, was a hellscape that looked like nothing that nature could produce.

“If someone from House Caputo, like Lady Paulette, tells me to do this again, I will. Because that’s what’s best for the people of the Caputo realms. But you’re different. You want me because that’s the easiest way, and the best route for you, right? I’m not helping with that.”

“…Then what’s the point of your power?!”

Seeing this landscape, Nuri believed it all. He believed that he could use this power to one-sidedly incinerate the rebels. He believed that this power was there for his use.

The rebels who had been destroyed on this plain left nothing behind, not even their remains. But for him, that wasn’t enough. He had to bury all of them in a wasteland like this.

“You are divine punishment! Your power is there to destroy those who do evil! Countries that do evil!”

The four aces of the Arcana Kingdom will never betray their masters. Whether that’s the character of their people, or the skill of the nobles in controlling others, is impossible to tell. However, what was undeniably true was that there was a mutual understanding between servant and master.

“That’s what you should destroy! There are sinners, evil-doers, that must be punished! Destroying them should be simple for you!”

The weapon of mass destruction with free will doesn’t deny that. But he had learned through plentiful experience that sweeping actions that seem simple are often difficult to clean up after.

And that making someone else do the difficult things that he can’t do is a wearying, depressing thing indeed.

“The only one who decides who deserves divine punishment is God. Do you think of yourself as a God?”

If Shouzo is divine punishment, then the one who can bring down that divine punishment is God. And currently, the only one he calls God is House Caputo.

“If you’re God, then you should deal with it yourself. It’s ‘simple,’ right?”

Part 4 — Conjectures

Father and daughter, sadly denied the good fortune of announcing glad tidings to the other, reconvene in one of Caputo's cities, near the center of the Arcana Kingdom. After exchanging updates on their efforts, they must now map out the path ahead, even if there is little to light the way.

"I see. Sansui refused, as expected…"

"Forgive me, Father. How did matters go with the Divine Punishment?"

"A wasted effort… He is fully in the hands of House Caputo and is allowing them to chain him with their hexes."

"I see… Then he is useless to us."

Had they gotten the adopted father of the sole surviving member of the Imperial House, the Young Sword Apostle, to join in their quest, then even the ponderous Arcana Kingdom would have followed with an offer of full assistance. Had they been able to pull the Scarred Fool into their orbit, then with him having already destroyed the rebel army once, they would have been able to reclaim the Domino Empire all by themselves.

However, both refused to lend their ears to the Imperial nobility, choosing instead to serve masters who, far from showing loyalty to the Crown, actively questioned it. Neither had understood the sheer honor they had been offered, not only in meeting Imperial nobles, but in being offered a place at their side. Such a momentous event was the stuff of family legend in the Empire. To refuse an offer from an Imperial noble went far beyond mere foolishness, leaving the two nobles uncertain if the commoners in question even understood what was being said to them.

"Hearing of those refusals, our compatriots have already put their own plans into motion."

"Oh, my… How impressive."

Yes, capable nobles wove plans within their plans. If the first scheme failed, then there was a second to take its place. The campaign to retake the Empire was already afoot.

"First, we will 'secure' Lady Lain. Next, we assassinate the chief rebel, who will be arriving here in Arcana shortly."

Both are eminently reasonable courses of action. Rebuilding an Empire requires an heir to the Empire, and if that heir is being 'held' by House Sepaeda, then she needs liberating. And with the head of the rebellion heading straight into enemy soil of his own free will, there's no reason not to assassinate him.

"And we will bury the Divine Punishment."

"…I see. If all of those plans come to fruition, then war between the Arcanians and the rebels will be unavoidable."

Then there's getting rid of Shouzo. The likely reason the Arcana Kingdom is willing to settle with the rebels is because they have the luxury of knowing they can destroy the rebels at any time they choose. That luxury

would vanish along with Shouzo and leave the kingdom no choice but to use its armies to put down the rebels.

“Quite, quite… We, the Imperial nobility, will rally around Lady Lain. The rebels, without their leader, will be easy prey as the Arcanians are forced to put them down after losing the Divine Punishment.”

On the matter of securing Lain, they simply say that they needed to protect the heir to the Imperial throne. As for the assassination of the rebel leader and Shouzo, well, that can be blamed on extremists among the rebels who were unhappy with the peace negotiations. A master stroke that will arrange things perfectly for their restoration.

“Such fools the Arcanians are, Father… Had they simply helped us to begin with, none of this would have happened.”

“Indeed, my dear Hari. Instead, they will miss the honor of supporting the next Emperor and lose their greatest mage. They have brought it all upon themselves.”

Yes, everything will proceed the way it should. After destroying the rebel army, no doubt the Arcana Kingdom will rely on the Imperial nobility to help them govern the vast lands of the Domino Empire. Without the invaluable and commanding presence of the nobility, any new emperor would be doomed to fail.

“One cannot govern a country with mere ideals. Is that not so, Hari?”

“Indeed. The role of a noble is to do what is necessary to secure power.”

Surely, neither the Arcana Kingdom’s Crown or nobility could comprehend such a grandiose plan. No doubt they will continue to believe they are acting of their own free will, unaware that they’re following a script written by the Imperial nobles. The price of underestimating the Imperial nobility would be paid for by their bloody labor.

Meanwhile, at House Batterabbe’s estate in the royal capital…

Currently, the Lord of House Batterabbe, his daughter Happine, her fiancé Saiga, as well as Magyan’s Sunae and Tahlan, are all assembled in a room together.

“It’s likely the emigre nobles are plotting to assassinate the new regime’s leader, as well as Shouzo, and kidnap Lain in the process.”

They discuss, with troubled expressions, subject matter that would drain the color from the Imperial conspirators’ faces. Everyone present but Saiga appears to find the statement unremarkable. Saiga, however, couldn’t help but furrow his brow. As he was operating from an amateur’s point of view, he couldn’t imagine people being stupid enough to try the things that had just been described.

“Um… Are you serious?”

“Did it sound in jest to you?”

“No, I don’t mean… Just seems pretty ridiculous.”

“No doubt… But they’re already making preparations.”

“But, uh… Just what are they trying to accomplish?”

Honestly, that's what's really escaping his grasp. Saiga can't understand what the nobles think they'll gain from doing any of these things.

"To maintain the war between Arcana and Domino and force us to take down the new regime."

"...Would that really happen?"

Even with Lord Batterabbe's explanation, Saiga still gives a quizzical tilt of his head. If these were manga or anime characters, sure, he could see them trying that sort of cartoonish villainy. But these are people. Surely even they know better.

"Saiga, you're only saying that because you've never met one of these emigres. They're all pretty much useless," a faintly irate Happine adds in support of her father's words. As a daughter of the main branch of House Batterabbe, Happine herself has likely received numerous unsolicited advances from the emigre nobles. Her disdain suggests the advances weren't particularly pleasant, either.

"They say desperation dulls the wit. Saiga, don't assume all men are equally wise. There would be no need for laws, in that case." Sunae, a princess who holds the Royal Presence, also appears to know many such fools. She certainly shows no surprise that the emigre nobles are putting such a harebrained scheme into motion.

"There is no need to go out of your way to understand them. As one tasked to protect the law, you need only focus on doing what's right." Tahlan's words are unvarnished truth. Rather than wonder why they're going to commit a crime, it's more important to focus on stopping that crime before it can happen.

"Y-Yes, you're right... Both assassination and kidnapping are bad. Letting the war continue is even worse."

"That's the spirit. They have their reasons for their actions, but we must act to stop them, for the sake of both countries."

The assassination of two men and kidnapping a girl. Success in any one of those schemes would be a major blow to the Arcana Kingdom. Indeed, the costs would be far graver than the emigre nobles could ever imagine.

"Saiga, Princess Sunae, Prince Tahlan. I would appreciate it if you could make your way to Caputo and protect the summit."

Which is why failure isn't an option. Lord Batterabbe prepares to deploy his ace in the effort.

Though the young man is not yet ready to handle this on his own, Lord Batterabbe hopes that, some day, Saiga will become an absolute ace akin to Sansui in capability.

But for that, the most important thing now is to gain experience.

Chapter 2 — Dictator of a Foreign Land

Part 5 — Defeat

“I’m sure you already know why we’re assembled here today.”

An assembly is taking place in Domino’s old imperial capital. The assembly is silent, with no sign of the cheer or optimism witnessed in the heady first days of the republic.

“We are here to discuss this failed war.”

The supreme leader thus declares the war against the Arcana Kingdom lost, and he does so with absolute certainty.

“First, the numbers. We’ve lost the entire force we assigned to this war. Aside from the forces deployed to maintain order and defend our territory, our military has effectively ceased to exist. Given our responsibility to govern all of the territories that once belonged to the Domino Empire, we have a great deal of land to protect. As such, we no longer have the capability to prosecute an offensive war.”

Although this is the body tasked with deciding the policies of the republic, the faces present at the assembly are all young. However, even among the young faces, ‘he’ stands out for his youth. Indeed, he’s so young that an outside observer wouldn’t be blamed for calling him a child.

“If I recall, you’re the one who’s been handling this war, as well as the negotiations with the Arcana Kingdom prior to that.”

If fleeing were allowed, the man addressed would have run. However, there was no way to escape the wielder of Dainsleif. Knowing this, he attempts a defense, even as all the color drains from his face.

“M-Mister President! I am sincerely sorry about misjudging the enemy’s forces! And I will admit we have taken grave losses. However…”

No, perhaps it wasn’t a defense.

“But just what was I supposed to do against THAT?!”

“True.”

His only real recourse was to shift the blame. As House Caputo had hoped, they had also broken the Domino Republic’s will to fight.

“On that, I fully agree. Even if we had gotten prior notice of that mage’s true capabilities, I doubt we would have taken it seriously.”

“Y-Yes, exactly! And, and, I’ve made vital contributions to the revolution! Surely the Republic is still in need of my talents!”

It’s impossible to know the precise details of what the Arcana Kingdom had done. Perhaps it was something that could only be done once, or it’s possible it might be difficult to move whatever created that effect. However, even if it was single-use, continuing the war was still impossible. There simply weren’t enough soldiers to do it.

“True, you’ve done a lot of good for the republic. But, tell me, does that good outweigh what we lost in this war?”

Everyone in the assembly shrinks back, intimidated. They are all afraid of the young man in front of them. Their fear further reinforces his authority.

“Let me also ask. Do you think the families of the slain soldiers are satisfied with your reasoning?”

“A-As for that…”

“You will have to take responsibility. The people will judge your fate.”

Obviously, this doesn’t mean some sort of plebiscite. The Republic has neither the money or the time for such a thing.

“You will be given a chance to explain yourself, and then you will be pilloried in front of the masses. For your sake, I hope they throw fewer stones at you and your family than at the nobles next to you.”

“P-Please, I beg of you, Mister President…”

“You’re begging the wrong man. If you want forgiveness, ask the citizens who’ve lost their loved ones.”

With an unquestionable final judgment, the young man once charged with the republic’s diplomacy is dragged out of the assembly hall. He and his family are going to have to be an outlet for the resentment of the masses. Given the magnitude of his failures, their future doesn’t look bright.

“Now that we’ve determined where the responsibility lies, we need to chart the path forward. See what we can offer them. Explore every possibility. Go ahead and throw the masses the contents of that man’s cellar, while you’re at it.”

The sovereign ruler of the republic thus demonstrates that he’s more than willing to sacrifice a fellow revolutionary comrade, even as he continues to direct the assembly’s deliberations.

There are those who are born to become king, who have been promised the throne since the moment of their birth.

However, there aren’t many who are destined to be revolutionaries when they’re born. People oppressed for generations, for example, often don’t even have the ability to rebel. Rebellion requires strength, and strength only comes when you can do more than struggle day after day just to survive.

The key question, then, is whether those with the strength to rebel also possess the needed passion.

“Eesh, and here I was carefully moving my chess pieces…and some bastard flips the board over.”

An emperor may sometimes be called the Son of Heaven, and believe that to be true. Often, that self-regard isn’t necessarily misplaced, as taking a country down from within requires a commitment to fight the Heavens themselves.

“I suppose that’s not entirely true…”

In that sense, ‘Heaven’ had given him the opportunity to rebel.

“What do you think, Your Majesty?”

Had he started his rebellion in the Arcana Kingdom, few of their subjects would have joined in his revolt. Most people can swallow their complaints if they believe their current way of life is how it really ought to be. The

situation changes quickly once their survival is no longer assured. Once deprived of that certainty, the ‘foolish masses’ will inevitably revolt.

“H-How dare you...!”

“I suffered a bit of a setback, so I figured I’d cheer myself up by seeing your useless face.”

The man now known as the President — black-haired and black-eyed — thus addresses a well-fed man imprisoned in a tiny cell. The well-fed man is clad in clothes of decent quality, is guaranteed sufficient food and drink, and hasn’t had a finger laid upon him. That is why he has the strength to turn his hatred on the President standing before him.

Of course, even if he were to escape his cell, it isn’t as though his life would necessarily improve. Alive thanks solely to the President’s sadistic urges, this room is his only and final refuge.

“...What is it?”

“We invaded Arcana and were soundly beaten.”

“Mwhahah...hahahaha! What did you expect, fool? If it had been the proper Imperial Army, you might have had a chance, but to think you could defeat the Arcanians with an army of starving peasants?! Absurd!”

The man whose government had been brought down by that very same army of starving peasants seems to forget this fact entirely as he laughs. Such is his pleasure at the President’s defeat that he has no doubt that it’s also a victory of sorts for him.

“You see?! We are the only ones worthy of ruling the Domino Empire! We, with the precious blood of the Imperial House, can rule this country, and no other can manage it! No other can maintain this Empire!”

He will be able to escape this room, then. And once he escapes, he will once again sit upon the throne and wear the Imperial crown. It seems that he’s fully convinced of that fact. Seeing the utter absurdity of the former Emperor’s behavior, the President regains some of his resolve. There’s definitely value to keeping a hated rival alive.

“No doubt you’re here to beg for Our forgiveness? No doubt you are here to turn your Sacred Treasures over to Us, and plead for Our wisdom in ruling this empire?”

“*Snerk...* No, not at all. You’re not going anywhere.”

“Impossible! There is no way you can rule this vast empire without Our help!”

The President smirks. He’s clearly mocking the former Emperor. He has nothing but contempt for the man who, even now, dreams of a day that will never come.

“Even if you got your crown back, it won’t bring the dead back to life. How do you intend to rebuild from here?”

“Hrmph, your problem is that you think of war in terms of winning and losing! Sign a peace treaty! Our ties with the Arcanians go back generations. If they know We have been restored to the crown, they will loan us food as a gift celebrating Our restoration!”

“Such a sad shadow of a man you are. The least you could do here would be to ignore the fact that you’ve already completely lost and claim that the souls of the slain soldiers would dig their way out of hell the moment you’re crowned again.”

The usurper seems happy to treat the Emperor like a court jester. In response to the mocking sneer, the Emperor raises his voice.

“You are the cause of all of this! If only you’d listened to Our demand to turn over the Sacred Treasures! Then there would have been no rebellion, and We would be enjoying the fruits of prosperity!”

“...Perhaps you’re right.”

The President isn’t originally from Domino. As such, if he hadn’t liked the government, he could’ve simply packed up and left, and that would have been the end of it. There was no reason for him to commit so much effort to overhauling this country.

“The Sacred Treasures choose their masters! No doubt they would have happily served Us the moment they were brought to Our presence!”

“But ‘they’ already disabused you of that particular delusion.”

“Clearly you made them say that! Surely they would be happier serving the Emperor of the great Domino Empire rather than some random bastard like you!”

Overweening pride, absolute confidence... The President snickers at the foolishness of it all. An Emperor who lives in a reality of his own making... The sight alone lets the President bask in a feeling of superiority.

“Just where does this delusional confidence come from? I destroyed everything that supported it.”

“Still clinging to that delusion, are you?”

“Who’s the delusional one? Sure, my words were delusional until the revolution succeeded, but that was then and this is now. I’m the one who now stands atop this country.”

“Yet a pretender you’ll remain! Put the crown on your head, sit on the throne if you wish, but the same rotten blood runs through your veins! Pathetic! No doubt the masses laugh at you behind your back!”

“And? All I care about is watching you suffer.”

Indulging his sadistic impulses, the President laughs mockingly as the Emperor quivers with rage.

“After all, I took over this country as a simple act of revenge.”

“...How would the others react if they heard those words?”

“They wouldn’t react at all. The only things propping up any semblance of life in this country are my Sacred Treasures. If I die, so does this country. There’s no one with the will to take the reins out of my hands. Even if one does eventually emerge, that’ll only be after I finish purging the Imperial House.”

A purge of the Imperial House...that alone isn’t unprecedented. After all, the first thing a new ruler does is to eliminate any trace of the previous

regime's presence. In that sense, what's truly odd is the fact that the former Emperor is still held in captivity. He should be long dead.

"Would you like a bit of news? Your remaining family is down to five members."

"Th-That few… You've killed that many?! You've killed Our wives and Our children! Yet you still haven't had enough?!"

"I haven't killed them. They've simply been captured and thrown in jail. We had to kill a handful that resisted, of course, but almost all of them have been captured alive."

They weren't all fat, unlikable men and women. While they may have an arrogant streak, there were plenty of mostly innocent children and maidens. Of course, the President planned to kill them all eventually.

"Y-You are going against nature itself! Be damned! If you kill us, we'll damn you until the end of your line!"

"Let's see this curse of yours. Go ahead, curse me to death. I'll allow it."

There are such things as hex artists in this world, after all. Curses do exist. However, the Emperor didn't have that ability, and neither did any members of the Imperial House already in captivity.

"I haven't forgotten, you know. That you ordered your soldiers to massacre the city that had treated me so well. Nothing has changed since then. Everything you do fails. You should have killed me then, but instead you killed everyone but me."

"All you needed to do was turn over the Sacred Treasures!"

"I suppose… I couldn't imagine that your underlings…that you yourself…would be so foolish as to destroy one of your own cities."

He hadn't taken things seriously enough. He hadn't considered the possibility of something so terrible happening in his own life.

"The city was at fault for hiding you, the man who wielded four of the Sacred Treasures!"

"I don't deny that. Thinking back on it now, the denizens of that city surely meant to claim my powers for themselves."

Rumors of a traveler who wielded the Sacred Treasures had come to the Emperor's attention. As a result, the Emperor ordered the city that had been caring for the President at the time to turn over the treasures. While there's no way to actually ascertain their true motives, in the end, the city's rulers respected the President's desires and refused the Emperor's demands. Angered by that refusal, the Emperor sent his army to destroy the city, right as the President was elsewhere.

"I wasn't there at the time. I was actually off making rain clouds."

"You needed only to turn over the treasures! That destruction was simply a deserved punishment!"

"Perhaps. No doubt the people of the city truly regretted their decision. They didn't believe, as you don't believe now, that everyone, regardless of age or gender, would be slaughtered."

The Emperor’s lackeys ordered the city to turn over the man with the Sacred Treasures. The city’s leaders told them the truth: that he wasn’t there. However, the Emperor’s underlings didn’t believe their protests, and even if they had believed them, that would have meant trouble for them. Failure to fulfill the Emperor’s demands meant putting their own necks on the line.

They burned the entire city to the ground, searching house to house, but they still couldn’t find him. Only then did they finally give up, leaving the President to return to the ruins of the city. Soaked by the rain he himself had created, he was left alone to contemplate just what had happened.

“But, at the very least, the people of that city were kind to me. That alone made me happy.”

Stated plainly, that was when he first became the wielder of the Sacred Treasures.

Vajra, the Heavenly Spear, grants the power to manipulate lightning and weather to a wielder challenging overwhelming power.

Dainsleif, the Demon Blade, provides the power to consume the blood of the wielder’s hated enemy in their quest for vengeance.

Ungaikyo, the Mirror of Truth, offers an infinite supply of tools to one willing to use, rather than simply collect, those items.

Elixir, the Divine Chalice, protects one who has a strong desire to live from all illness and calamity.

He had finally fulfilled the conditions for each of the four Sacred Treasures in his possession.

“I swore that I’d have my vengeance on you. Not just you, of course, but also all of your underlings that carried out your orders, and all those in power who swept your savagery under the rug. I swore I’d have my revenge on all of you!”

“Foolish… You simply don’t see the bigger picture! What it means to give great power to the foolish and weak! And just what it means to rebel against the Imperial House, the rightful rulers of this land!”

“The results are already known. Your regime is now just a footnote in the history books, as is your entire line. That’s what happened when you tried to steal the Sacred Treasures, then oppressed those who refused to bend the knee to you.”

As the ruler of the country, the President doesn’t feel the ex-Emperor’s statements are that inherently wrong. He’s also acting in a way similar to the ex-Emperor. But even then, the man in front of him is gravely mistaken about how this will turn out.

“I will kill all of your relatives before your eyes. Then, I’ll kill you last. That’s my revenge!”

“You’re mad!”

“You’re the one who planted that madness! Do you really think I would stay sane after having everyone who cared for me massacred by your lackeys?!”

The ex-Emperor in front of him is a mere man. He doesn't have any special talents or possess any special skills. He may have a certain level of education, but that hardly makes him unique. He's just a man who, by luck and through his birthright, held power over others.

"The people that were afraid of you will now gleefully kill your family, then kill you! Then, they'll follow someone else, even if it isn't me, and move on with their lives!"

"This country will not last long without Us, without the light of the Imperial House to guide it! Indeed, you've already lost, haven't you?!"

"Says the man who lost to me. Weren't you the one stating that winning and losing wasn't the point? Losing isn't the end; it's just a minor setback! I won't give up, 'Your Majesty,' not until I've killed every last one of you!"

Part 6 — Sacred Treasures

“Damn. Got too cocky.”

With several carriages as escorts, the President’s carriage leaves the former imperial capital, setting off for the Arcana Kingdom’s Caputo territories. It seems that they have concerns of their own, since they’re proposing negotiations despite having an overwhelming advantage. With the Domino Republic not only losing, but facing insurmountable odds, the President has thus chosen to attend himself.

“I let myself get carried away, as though I had some governance cheats. No, I suppose that’s not quite it…not that it matters.”

At a minimum, the fact that his army was as powerful as his imagination could make it led to a certain degree of overconfidence and lack of interest. There was nothing left for him to do as the commander in chief, leaving the actual execution to commanders on the ground. That’s what he thought the situation was.

He had let himself believe that the quality of their equipment made up for their lack of training. No, the reality was that it actually did make up for their lack of training. The actual problem was that the enemy went beyond even that.

“I guess I let my guard down because I’d secured my revenge. Ah, damn it all. Just because I’d taken over a country, I figured it was just a matter of putting the right policies into motion… Stupid, stupid.”

Even the President himself needed to reflect on recent events before he recognized his own conceit. The man charged with negotiations must have been overflowing with arrogance.

“‘Please, turn over the nobles who’ve sought asylum in your kingdom! Of course, we insist that you also turn over any wealth they took, as well!’ ‘We can’t possibly do that. They’re not criminals, just refugees!’”

The President begins a little skit inside the carriage. Each gesture is exaggerated, hamming it up despite there not being an audience.

“‘They stole the empire’s wealth, and it rightfully belongs to the people! The very act of taking it with them is a crime!’ ‘That’s for the laws of our kingdom to decide, not you.’ ‘Perhaps you are underestimating our strength? You will regret not acceding to our demands.’ ‘Just what, exactly, are you saying? You, yourself, seem to be underestimating our resolve.’ ‘You will regret this… Dismissing us as mere upstarts.’”

The skit ends. And sadly, it wasn’t that far off the mark. A strong military is directly correlated with how much negotiating power you have in foreign affairs. It’s not wrong, exactly, to strike an aggressive posture if you have the military power to back it up. However, in the end, the military is still there as a deterrent and last resort. It was far too reckless to have thrown it around so carelessly… At least, in hindsight, anyway.

“Well, nothing to do about that. First things first, I have to end this war.”

‘You don’t mean to avenge yourself on the Arcanians?’

The modest-sized blade speaks with a woman's voice. The President is the only person in the carriage. Clearly it's not a human's voice.

"Don't ask stupid questions, Dainsleif. You, of all people, should know I have no intention of seeking revenge."

'…Fair point. That was boorish. Apologies.'

It's true that they had lost a large percentage of their working-age men. He regrets that loss, and it's certainly a blow to the Republic. However, that doesn't drive him to seek revenge. They had invaded with the goal of pillage and plunder and had been defeated. The Arcanians had been entirely justified in their actions. He's not so shameless to demand revenge for that, and going on the offensive now would be worse than reckless.

'My my, a petty little tool, unworthy of a country's ruler, is offering her opinions, is she?'

A round mirror, a size too small to be a full looking glass but large enough to show a person's head and chest, shimmers as it speaks. The voice from the mirror is teasing the demon blade on the President's hip.

'If you're so hungry for revenge, perhaps you should seek a new partner?'

'I see you're irritated that your army of knockoffs was defeated.'

'The whole purpose of an item is to be used! There's no value in an unused tool! You, an unused tool, have no place to talk, especially about anything as petty as whether things are real or not!'

The President listens to the argument without comment. There's nothing to be gained from injecting oneself into an argument between women.

'So, like the rest of us, you simply want to be used.'

'I'm not unhappy with how often I'm used! Unlike you, he uses me constantly!'

'What good is being used if that use isn't fruitful?'

'How dare you?! You know who it is that's protecting this country?! Not Vajra, not Elixir, and certainly not you! It's my image that keeps this country safe!'

The Domino Empire was a rather large country, sharing borders with numerous other kingdoms. As such, this defeat should have meant invasions from several different directions. However, the arms and armor created by Ungaikyo have kept the other countries from capitalizing on Domino's weakness.

'Oh dear. Petty objects have petty thoughts, it seems. Is that not so, my Master?'

A large and elaborate spear, almost godly in its appearance, speaks in turn. Propped up in the corner of the carriage, Vajra the Heavenly Spear appears exasperated by the squabbling pair.

'Hrmph, since the Master's been doing nothing but desk work in the palace, it's not as though you've seen much use lately, either.'

'That's right. Just because you saw a lot of use during the war doesn't mean anything now!'

‘Such is the limit for small items like you two, I suppose. You can only think in the short term rather than look at the big picture. Think about it. As things move forward, I’ll be the most useful among us. Such limited perspective.’

The tenor of the argument inside the carriage grows louder. Finally, the small chalice next to the President speaks up with a voice as loud as the other three.

‘Good that you all have such spirit! Such is to be expected of the Eight Sacred Treasures! And so long as we have our Master, we have nothing to fear from defeat! That spirit will sustain us ever onward!’

With Elixir the Divine Chalice rejoicing with an odd interpretation of the happenings in the carriage, the President sinks deeper into silence. Sure, he’d been play-acting on his own just a few moments before, but he’d actually prefer a little bit of quiet here.

‘Our Master’s path of glory has just begun! Which means we have but to move onward! Is that not so, O great Master?’

“Of course. If I was going to give up this easily I wouldn’t have bothered starting a new government.”

It may go without saying, but it’d certainly be odd for the President to be involved in building an entire new government if all he was interested in doing was defeating the Empire and killing all of the Imperial House. While the President himself doesn’t have much in the way of combat ability, with Dainsleif at his side and a certain amount of wealth, it wouldn’t have been difficult for him to go around the country rooting out and killing members of the Imperial House by himself.

Although a ‘revolutionary army’ had been necessary to bring down the Empire itself, once the old regime had fallen, being involved with a new government would have been nothing but a burden and a distraction from his revenge. All he would have had to do at that point was put the regime in someone else’s hands and walk away.

“Of course, I don’t have much interest in power, and it’s not as though the masses are blameless or innocent. Nor do I feel that much of a calling as a politician, or much care about what everyone in the country thinks. But I used them for my own ends, and it’s thanks to them I was able to bring down the Emperor.”

The creation of a new government, a new start, were simply sweet words without substance. The promise that everything would get better once the Emperor and the nobles were defeated was, in a sense, a scam. Of course, it’s not that everyone involved was completely taken in by those words, but many of the citizens did, in fact, believe that to be the case.

“They contributed their sweat and blood, and it’s thanks to them that I’ve accomplished my goals. I’m not such an ingrate that I can turn my back and walk away from them now.”

It’s not as though he’s got a particularly sharp mind, but even then, he can’t simply leave everything as it is and walk away. He wants the citizens

who helped him bring down the Empire to believe things are at least somewhat better than they were. He's not as passionate about it as he was about his revenge, but he's still sincere in that desire.

"Given that taxes in the Empire were 'eight to the crown, two to the people,' well, it's not like the standard we're trying to improve on was ever that great. We'll make the foreign secretary take responsibility for the loss, and if we can survive this and heal the wounds of war we...well, I suppose that'll be tough."

The initial plan of solving everything by winning the war is now impossible, which leaves taking time to solve the problems the hard way as the only remaining solution.

'Indeed! Motivation is important! I had feared securing your revenge would leave you a demotivated husk! I'm glad I was mistaken! So long as you maintain that motivation, wherever you lead, I will follow!'

"Well, thanks... I mean, it's not like anything is finished yet."

Capture all of the Imperial House, then kill all of them in front of the Emperor. Then, at last, kill the Emperor himself. That's when his revenge will be truly complete. Meaning that, so long as even one member of the Imperial House survives, nothing is finished.

"There's always the chance of a last gasp reversal. I know that better than anyone."

In that sense, he should probably just go ahead and kill them. But doing that might have a disastrous effect on his motivation. Which means he needs to do things properly if he's going to do them at all.

'That's the spirit! I'm behind you all the way!'

"Gee, thanks... I suppose the question is what they'll demand. I'll happily hand over whatever territory they want, but they'll probably ask for a Sacred Treasure. In that case... I suppose I can offer them Vajra."

'...A moment, my Master. My ears must be deceiving me. Did you, in fact, say that you would offer them me, the spear that can manipulate the heavens?'

Vajra, the Heavenly Spear, a weapon with the ability to control the weather... It's certainly powerful, but it requires a rebellious spirit to use.

"I don't have a choice, I mean, it's kind of natural, isn't it? Even if the Arcanians don't have anyone capable of using you, so the real problem is with me being able to use you in the first place. You're the one that an enemy country would most want me to not possess."

'Even as a negotiating tool, being of use to our Master is an honor, Vajra.'

'Oh my, oh my, the powerful Heavenly Spear is so very popular, isn't she? I'm afraid a mere Mirror of Truth like myself can do nothing but watch from the corner.'

'I won't forget the fact that I was able to serve the same master as you, Vajra... Hold your head up high as you sacrifice yourself for the sake of our Master's people, Vajra!'

Everyone other than Vajra agreed with the proposal. Really, because she was the most powerful of those present, there really wasn't much room for argument.

'Wait, there's also the possibility they'll demand one of the other treasures! Is that not so, Master?!'

"Well, sure. It's not as though it'd be out of the question for them to ask for Ungaikyo, too..."

'Master?! I mean, you're not wrong, but if you hand me over, this country will be ruined!'

"Which is why I can't afford to hand over Ungaikyo. And I doubt the other two would attract much attention. There's not that much meaning to have Elixir, whose only value is in protecting oneself, and there's no point in a country owning Dainsleif."

Fortunately, he's aware that the Arcanians already possess Eckesachs. Since Eckesachs knows the capabilities of all the Sacred Treasures, they will be working from an accurate understanding of the abilities. That means they're most likely to demand Vajra.

'...Heh, you have missed one possibility, my Master.'

"And that is, Vajra?"

'There's the possibility that they seek all four Treasures and, more importantly, you, who can make use of all of them, Master!'

"...I really doubt that."

Certainly, if four Sacred Treasures and their wielder were packaged into a set, that'd be something the Arcanians would be willing to sacrifice just about anything to acquire. But the President is still the head of the Domino Republic, after all. Even in a victorious war, they certainly wouldn't demand that the loser hand over their sovereign and all of their national treasures.

"I mean, depending on the conditions, I might go along with them, but they probably wouldn't believe me. I'm a revolutionary. Would a kingdom invite a revolutionary into their midst?"

'S-Surely it's not impossible! After all, my Master, you are the wielder who can make use of four of the Sacred Treasures! An unprecedented talent!'

"Uh, but the situation is so bad that even I can't do anything about it, which is why we're going to surrender and hash out a peace, remember...?"

Whatever the logic behind it, the Arcana Kingdom owns forces equivalent to a tactical bomber at the very least. There's no way they'd demand more power for themselves. That's what the Domino Republic believes.

"I don't want to say this, but in that case, we've got no choice but to commit to all-out resistance. If the Republic loses Ungaikyo and I at this stage, things will go just as the Emperor said. That's something we have to stop at all costs."

'Master, please reconsider accepting if they demand just I, the Heavenly Spear!'

The revolutionary who defeated the Domino Empire, the ‘Dictator of a Foreign Land,’ Ukyou Fuushi… He still had no idea what awaited him in the Arcana Kingdom.

“Still, it’s not like I’m going to be fighting against the Heavens again. I’m planning to focus on governing, just like a normal politician.”

‘But surely there’s some way! It’d be unjust if the others remain in use but I sit around gathering dust in storage!’

Part 7 — Five Treasures

“Well, this really is quite a sight. You’d think they really did have missiles, or even a bomber…”

As Ukyou Fuushi crosses the border on his way to Caputo, he uses the occasion to take a look at the lands that Shouzo, in accordance with House Caputo’s wishes, ‘plowed.’ The sight was enough to degrade the morale of even the dedicated Domino Republic soldiers tasked with defending him.

To grovel before the opponent who had slaughtered your compatriots… Even though the Domino Republic had started the war, Ukyou had been the only one among the party remotely satisfied with the decision. But now, having witnessed the results of the carnage wrought by Shouzo…it was enough to break any sense of resistance among the others.

“…You’d almost be tempted to believe they brought some unthinkable power over from another world. This goes completely against the rules of this world, terrain included. Could any of you do anything near this?”

‘No.’

‘I couldn’t.’

‘Certainly can’t!’

‘…I-I could do this if I had a few months’ time!’

The Divine Spear Vajra, claiming to control the heavens, is the only one to argue otherwise. True, if one could spend several months pelting an area with constant storms, that would certainly change the terrain. The problem is that even that’s not enough to simply wipe an entire army off the map.

“I don’t suppose this kingdom’s connected to Japan or America, is it? Maybe if the SDF or US military came over… No, they would have taken us out already.”

Ukyou decided to put aside the memory of the scene in front of him. Regardless of whether or not the destructive power unleashed here could ever be used again, the Domino Republic no longer had the strength to prosecute a war. He’s not the villain in a war novel, and he’s certainly not going to fight to the last man. The war had been waged in pursuit of material gains. Now that it had failed, it was time to cut their losses.

“First things first, I’ve gotta end this war…”

Although possessing several Sacred Treasures, Ukyou himself lacks any spectacular power of his own. With a faint sense of dread, but an even greater sense of purpose, he heads off into hostile territory.

The eastern edge of the Arcana Kingdom, the fortress city of the Caputo realm… The peace negotiations are hosted in the very city that Ukyou sought to conquer. Although they couldn’t exactly welcome the enemy head of state lavishly, the king and the current lord of House Caputo are at least there to greet him.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with us. I am the President of the Domino Republic, Ukyou Fuushi.”

“We are the King of the Arcana Kingdom.”

“I am the Lord of House Caputo, one of the Great Houses of the kingdom. I am afraid that the unfortunate misunderstanding between our peoples has resulted in great tragedy. I hope we can use this opportunity to end this conflict before either of our people suffer any further injury.”

The two leaders welcoming Ukyou greet him with the ease that comes from having an overwhelmingly superior hand to play. It’s certainly not the sort of attitude one would expect toward a head of state that had just tried to invade them. It was almost anticlimactic, in a way, but Ukyou maintained a level expression nevertheless. He needed to wrest the best possible settlement from this mess, or else the Domino Republic was doomed.

“No doubt you’re tired from your journey. We’ve organized a small banquet. Please join us.”

“We have arranged for one of the Sacred Treasures in our kingdom to greet your Sacred Treasures. No doubt it will be a fine opportunity for them to catch up.”

“Hold it.”

Dainsleif poofed into her human form. Taking on the form of a gloomy, simply dressed young woman, Dainsleif turned to the king, as though to accentuate her need for an answer.

“Surely, that doesn’t mean Pandora is here?”

“While we do possess Pandora, she is not suited for this sort of occasion. We have only summoned Eckesachs for this meeting.”

“A wise choice.”

Dainsleif’s relief is evidently shared by Ungaikyo and Vajra, as they too relax and turn into their human forms. Evidently, they all really hate dealing with Pandora.

“Glad it’s not Noah or Danua, either… It’s hard to hold a conversation with those two…”

Ungaikyo, transforming into a petite woman dressed in an elaborately embroidered long-sleeved gown, rejoices at not having to face those she doesn’t get along with.

“I don’t understand Noah, who finds contentment in not being used, while Danua’s just so fixated on pretending to be human. A tool is only valuable when it’s actually being used, don’t you agree, my Master?”

“Well…I don’t know about those two you’re talking about, but I’m certainly thankful for you.”

“Oh my…! You all heard that, yes? It seems I’m the most valuable tool here!” Ungaikyo says, with such obvious glee that it completely overcomes her usual elegance and refinement.

As though to contest her claim, Vajra, who has also taken on her human form, roughly pinches Ungaikyo’s cheek.

“Hrmph, there’s no value to cheap, disposable tools. The true value of a Sacred Treasure is that it can do something no other tool can, such as control the heavens. Is that not so?”

In her human form, Vajra is a very large woman. Standing nearly two meters tall, her proportionately long fingers pinch and twist at Ungaikyo's cheek. It's a very gentle bit of violence.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"So, my Master… Am I not better suited to be the pillar of the nation, far moreso than a tool that can simply be replaced? Do you not agree?"

"What's the point of putting a tool only a single person can use in the hands of a king?"

The two treasures, each with national strategic value, are caught in a game of one-upmanship. They are apparently oblivious to their owner, Ukyou, appearing quite embarrassed by his equipment. Despite being welcomed as foreign dignitaries, they are going out of their way to show a distinct lack of decorum.

"My apologies, Your Majesty, Your Grace. I believe they will quiet down if given a bit of time… I'm afraid that any input on my part will only serve to add fuel to the fire…"

"Not at all. No doubt the logic of humans means little to the treasures of the gods. You have our sympathy."

"I see that these Sacred Treasures are rather finicky…"

Putting aside the subject of their discussion, with two of the Treasures acting overtly like catty women, the three men can't help but feel distinctly uncomfortable in their presence. On the other hand, Elixir is clearly enjoying watching the two argue.

"Ahh… Such spirit! To debate their own strengths and compete to see who is best! Such is the fate of Sacred Treasures who have assembled at a single master's hand…! Both of you, keep at it! I'm rooting for both of you!"

With an appearance that looks more like a young man, dressed in clothing that reinforces that impression, Elixir is thus egging on the argument… Or perhaps she's just approving of their passion. Either way, she doesn't appear to be worried about the impact on the humans present. Watching her fellow treasures with a look of exasperation, Dainsleif bows her head apologetically to Ukyou.

"Apologies, Master. Please, go on ahead without us."

"I can't very well leave dangerous objects like you sitting around. Ungaikyo, Vajra, that's enough; let's get going. Do you intend to have me attend the banquet on my own?"

In the end, the arguing pair declare a temporary truce, for Ukyou's sake, and head to the banquet hosted at the Caputo estate.

"It's been a long time, Dainsleif, Vajra, Ungaikyo, and Elixir… Two thousand years or so, by my reckoning. That you are all serving a single master is an interesting turn."

For the moment, the leaders of the two countries have decided to put aside matters of war and politics, contenting themselves with having a pleasant chat. The catalyst in this case was their old acquaintance,

Eckesachs. As she stood there next to Saiga in her human form, the other four treasures all felt a certain amount of nostalgia.

“Ah, Eckesachs.”

“Yes, Dainsleif?”

“I see he abandoned you after all.”

“…Quiet.”

Eckesachs pouts as Dainsleif points out she has a new master. The demon blade rolls her eyes as she takes another jab at the sacred sword.

“It turned out as I said it would, didn’t it? By being with an Immortal who was seeking perfection, you were inevitably going to be tossed aside.”

“Oh, don’t be so smug! It’s easy to declare in hindsight!” Eckesachs cries out, tearfully trying to deny Dainsleif the satisfaction of being right.

“Hindsight? I recall telling you the same thing at the very start.”

Ukyou tilts his head quizzically at the exchange.

“You haven’t seen each other for two thousand years, right? If it’s been two thousand years, it’s not a matter of abandonment at that point, is it? A wielder from two thousand years ago has to be long dead by now.”

“You see, Master, Eckesachs’s previous master, her *pre-vi-ous master*, was an odd little Immortal. An Immortal, do you see? The folks who have no fixed lifespan, despite being human. Most Immortals spend their time meditating or in contemplation, and thus just sit there not moving, but that particular Immortal was an odd one, running around the world as a swordsman. He was so fixated with developing his own strength that he ended up seeking out Eckesachs! Isn’t that a riot?”

Ungaikyo, evidently amused by this subject, giggles as she recounts it. It seems that this is a running argument from well over two thousand years ago. The sheer timescale of the squabble is beyond the understanding of the human listeners.

“No fixed lifespan…so does that mean he’s still around?”

“Probably, based on the look on Eckesachs’s face. At the very least, he’s not dead. Meaning he tossed her aside, poor girl…”

“Hahaha… To be tossed aside by the master you were so proud of… How pathetic, Eckesachs. What was it you claimed? That you two would seek perfection throughout eternity? And yet he tossed you aside!”

Vajra joins in on the mockery. Based on the conversation, Eckesachs must have spent quite a bit of time bragging about her master to the other Sacred Treasures two thousand years ago. Vajra and Ungaikyo were savoring their joy at learning that Eckesachs had been thrown away.

“Quiet, stick! Considering all you do is look like a spear and don’t even fulfill the function of one, you’re hardly in a position to mock me!”

“S-Stick?! T-Tch, this is the problem with small items! You’re too short to see the bladed tip of my spear, after all!”

“Say what you will, you’re still a mere stick! Given all you do is poke clouds and predict the weather! You considering yourself a bladed weapon is a sad joke!”

“Grrr, you’re a similar ‘thing’ yourself! You simply have the shape of a sword! What you really do is amplify magical ability!”

“I have my pride as a sword, and in every age, my wielder has always been a swordsman! And what of your wielder? He doesn’t look like he has any skill with a spear! A look at the wielder says plenty about the item! No doubt the one being used as a weapon is probably Dainsleif, yes?”

“...To rattle on and on based on mere speculation! This is the problem with you small items!”

The assembled members of the Eight Sacred Treasures continue their heated argument. Only Ukyou and Saiga, drawn to one another by a shared sense of fellow-suffering, quietly exchange a firm handshake.

Though the heir to House Batterabbe, Saiga has no influence in these proceedings, making a bond with him useless to Ukyou. However, watching their items argue, the two have realized that they're kindred spirits. There's a deep satisfaction in learning that one isn't alone in the world. This is particularly true if the common experience is one of suffering.

"While we're at it, perfection isn't an attainable thing like revenge is. I recall telling you that the pursuit of perfection wouldn't be a happy one for your master."

"Silence, Dainsleif! What need is there for a Sacred Treasure to merely achieve revenge?! A mere rock to the head while the target is sleeping is more than enough to accomplish that task!"

"I believe I mentioned I was fine with that as well. We're tools — a means for our wielders to achieve their ends. My Master, for example, is using me to gather up the targets of his vengeance, but he hasn't made use of me as a blade. But since my Master appears pleased with the result, then I'm content, as well."

The Eight Sacred Treasures — all legendary weapons and equipment. This banquet has five of them assembled all at once. Are they petty or regal? Grand in scale or small? Special or ordinary? The argument was hard to rate. On the one hand, it was easy to understand parts of it, but on the other, the scope defied human understanding.

"An outcome to be expected of your arrogant, picky personality, Eckesachs!"

"Coming from you, Ungaikyo, perhaps that's a compliment! You, who lack any standards and claim you're happy to be used, no matter the person!"

"The whole point of a tool is to be used by people who need us, no? You, after all, are a mere lump of metal to those who can't use magic! A tool is most useful when everyone can use it!"

"What would you know, given all you're capable of doing is producing temporary fake copies of things? You're a mockery of the very idea of creating tools!"

"The fact that they're temporary is the whole point. Storing things is silly! Tools are there to be used until they break. As for real or fake? Even more irrelevant! What's important is how useful they are!"

The only thing that's clear from this conversation is that, left alone, they'll probably continue this argument for several thousand years.

"Yes, yes, the fact that Eckesachs, Dainsleif, Vajra, and Ungaikyo are all so driven is a wonderful thing! I, Elixir, am pleased to see you all doing so well!"

Part 8 — Evaluation

“What did you think of him?”

“Rather more ordinary than expected. Given our previous concerns, it was almost anticlimactic.”

After pleasant but meaningless chatter and watching the debate between the Sacred Treasures, the first day of the conference has come to an end. In the aftermath, the king and Lord Caputo discuss their impressions of the evening. They’ve finally been able to speak to the head of the neighboring country, true, but this was merely the beginning.

“Yes... The impression I had is that he is perhaps a bit heartless, but he hasn’t done anything wrong as head of state.”

“Including the fact that he is willing to bow his head to us... That he knows when to cut his losses and retreat is good. It will save us time in talking to him.”

Just what sort of man is the revolutionary who took down the Domino Empire? If he were hopelessly naïve or foolish, there’d be no point in negotiating. But, at the very least, he didn’t show any such failings in their brief meeting. He seems more reasonable than the emigre nobles, anyway.

“It appears he’s driven by emotion in his pursuit of the Imperial House, but also by a sense of duty in political matters. A sense of professionalism, in a way.”

“His lack of attachment lets him switch tacks as needed. It’s a trait we should be thankful for.”

He didn’t bring down the old regime out of a sense of idealism or ideology, but rather from a hatred of the Imperial House. The fact that he wields Dainsleif makes that all but assured, but it is fortunate indeed that they have been able to confirm that fact.

“As for the Lightning Slasher’s daughter... It’s too early to say. Still, I doubt he’ll feel any hatred toward a child who never derived any benefit from being a member of the Imperial House.”

“In the end, that will depend entirely on his emotions. Emotions can’t be easily measured, or even properly understood, even by the one feeling them.”

The most important question is whether or not Lain is considered a target in his revenge plans. Depending on the outcome of that question, Sansui might very well decide he has no choice but to kill him and move accordingly.

“We’re fortunate that he’s leading his country, whatever the reason. It’s certainly possible that, without him, sufficiently desperate individuals might decide to risk it all on another invasion. It would be such a wasted effort.”

“It would be a pity to lose him at this juncture. Now, do you feel he is worth drawing to your side?”

“...Too soon. Far too soon to tell.”

The Arcana Kingdom would prefer that the Domino Republic maintain its current form.

They can flourish or they can founder, but they'd prefer to avoid a flood of desperate refugees. To conquer the territory and govern it would be an even bigger burden. Doubling their current lands just wasn't a feasible solution. Even with the four aces available, it wasn't something that could be easily or simply accomplished.

Then what about the interests of House Arcana? Though highly dependent on Ukyou's personality and character, they would like to draw him into their orbit, if at all possible. As the wielder of four of the Sacred Treasures, he not only has symbolic value, but also practical worth.

He's a man who literally brought down an entire empire. In terms of accomplishments, he's certainly got more behind him than even the Arcanian aces. Still, it's not a simple matter to draw a head of state like Ukyou into their allegiance.

Ukyou himself realizes this, but if the Republic loses both Ukyou and Ungaikyo, both politically and materially, then its neighboring countries will start carving off pieces of Domino. As such, pulling him into their sphere of influence would require winning an all-out war and absorbing the Republic, something that's not in the best interests of the kingdom itself.

"Still, he's worth giving it a try."

"I see… I'm glad to hear that, Your Majesty."

Now that they know Ukyou isn't the sort to foolishly commit himself to a losing war out of spite, the Crown, who would dearly love to add him to their ranks, would certainly prefer to try to steer him away from targeting Lain. If they can succeed in that, there's a fair chance they can draw him to their side. Of course, that requires dealing with another issue still on the table.

"In which case, that leaves us with the problem of the Imperial nobility."

"It would be best for them to struggle to the last."

Even depleted as the Domino Republic is, the emigre nobles still don't have enough strength to bring it down. As such, they're dependent on the Arcana Kingdom for all of their schemes, but the kingdom is already well on its way to completely throwing the Empire aside and accepting the Republic as the legitimate rulers of Domino. When that happens, the nobles will certainly run amok. At the very least, that's what the information available so far suggests.

"We cannot afford to let any of the three that'll be targeted fall into their hands."

"Is it a blessing or a curse that the Lightning Slasher adopted the foundling…?"

The Young Sword Apostle is strong beyond reason. Even the martial House Sepaeda couldn't measure the extent of his power, which must have been why they chose to try to figure out the extent of his ability by having him clash with the Arcana Kingdom's most elite fighting force, the Royal

Guard. Of course, the only thing they learned was that even they didn't stand a chance against him.

"He's a simple man. He's not reliant on House Sepaeda."

"As you say, Your Majesty."

"...He would be so much more reassuring to have if We did not have to compete against him."

The king, at least on a personal level, is a bit envious of the dictatorial nature of the former Empire. He'd love to run the country based on his will alone, using the full extent of his abilities. The reality is that he'd love to have the opportunity to use the four aces as he wished.

Were that an option... The possibilities would be...

"We must content ourselves with the knowledge that competing against a powerful rival makes Us more powerful in turn."

Part 9 — Independence

Although the House Batterabbe party was tasked with guarding the summit, they had not been assigned a particular location to watch over during the evenings. As such, with a visibly irate Eckesachs in tow, they made their way to one of the estate's balconies to enjoy the night air.

"Didn't know you had such a short fuse, Eckesachs..."

This was an unexpected part of his weapon's personality. Having recently witnessed her explosive temper, Saiga now tries to calm Eckesachs as she stews in her human form.

"Frustrating... To finally have an opportunity to travel with you, and all that awaits us is a collection of hassles."

Sunae gives Saiga a sidelong glance, having already had her fill of the troublesome political assignment. They're not here on vacation, so the likelihood of any free time to enjoy the surroundings is close to nil. Whatever her royal opinions of the political stakes, as a young woman, she finds the situation tiresome.

"Politics is a troublesome beast. But to keep war from devouring more lives, this sort of hassle is a necessary evil," Tahlan lightly chastises his sister.

Negotiations between countries at war are extremely important, vital to reducing the possibility of bloodshed. They aren't something to be taken lightly.

"...I know. My apologies."

Eckesachs, while still pouting, offers up an apology. The conversation between her and the other Sacred Treasures had descended into such a level of inanity that Saiga and Ukyou had to smack some sense into them.

"Then perhaps you should act in a way appropriate to your station! Your behavior was hardly appropriate for a legendary sword!"

"Now, now... So I guess you were still with Suiboku when you last saw them, huh, Eckesachs?"

Saiga tries to calm Sunae's agitation while directing the question to Eckesachs.

"Indeed. We ran into them about two thousand years ago, and even fought against their masters. It was about five hundred years after that when Suiboku and I went our separate ways."

Everyone present has met Suiboku, Eckesachs's old master. As such they know why he abandoned Eckesachs. It's a brutal reality for Eckesachs, but the sad decision to leave her behind had ultimately contributed to his further development.

"Dainsleif had already predicted our split at the time. That if he sought perfection, then at some point he'd let go of the ultimate sword in pursuit of that perfection. I hate to admit it, but she was right. Dainsleif and I, while both swords, have always had divergent purposes."

Eckesachs, the Ultimate Divine Sword… Her function was to amplify ‘energy’ in its broadest sense.

Dainsleif, the Demon Blade of Vengeance… Her function was to drain the blood of those she cut.

While both were undoubtedly Sacred Treasures, the defining characteristics of their wielders couldn’t have been more different.

“I only accept those seeking to attain strength as my wielder. That is, my purpose is to function as a sword. But she’s different. She’s a means to fulfill an end called revenge.”

Well, perhaps that’s true. As Suiboku himself had noted, to become the strongest is a goal in and of itself, not a means to achieve something else. Just like Shouzo, those that are truly the greatest are too powerful to be used simply as a means.

“I prefer being wielded as a sword. But in her case, so long as the revenge happens, she doesn’t care if her own blade tastes blood or not.”

To achieve revenge by organizing a revolution and arming a large mob of people… Those actions have little to do with the Demon Blade of Vengeance itself. She has no role in any of it. But, even should that come to pass, Dainsleif is still satisfied.

“Suppose she thinks she’s enlightened… Pretentious.”

Still, Eckesachs, having viewed ‘the strongest’ objectively, can’t deny the truth of those words. She just can’t accept it, either.

“It wasn’t your fault, Eckesachs, but it wasn’t Master Suiboku’s fault, either. I understand that.”

“…Mm.”

The ordinary mortals breathing the night air at the Caputo Estate understand that they’re dealing with a matter of Immortals and Sacred Treasures, beings that work on a time scale entirely their own. It’s a matter that’s simply far too massive in scale to really consider objectively. These were matters that had taken place over so many passing years and months that it made those present want to gaze up and lose themselves in the stars above.

“Still, the reality is that my Sacred Treasures were at fault. I’m here to apologize.”

A spear, a chalice, a short blade, and a mirror… A man appears carrying those four items. Obviously, it’s Ukyou Fuushi, supreme leader of the Domino Republic.

“Ah, if it isn’t the new emperor himself.”

“My people call me that. I’m starting to think I should just take that title and be done.”

Having received a faintly challenging welcome from Tahlan, Ukyou responds a bit tiredly. He joins the four cooling off on the balcony, likewise gazing up at the night sky.

“Let’s see… Who were you again?”

“Magyan Tahlan. A royal from a kingdom far, far from here.”

“I see… It’s nice here, isn’t it? Be glad you didn’t come to my country.”

It was a very tired, self-deprecating remark, hardly worthy of a revolutionary who’d toppled an entire empire. But Tahlan simply looked upon him with admiration.

“‘My country’… I don’t believe there’s a man alive who hasn’t wanted to say those words and mean it literally.”

“I suppose that’s true. I’m getting a bit sick of it, but it’s still…”

Hearing Tahlan’s words, Ukyou turns his gaze toward the horizon, looking far-off to his own country.

His country, ravaged by war, a country he himself had pushed into a spiral of destruction. Having risen up to destroy the country, he had actually defeated the ruling regime, and now, he worked to obliterate all that remained of the Imperial House. With these thoughts in mind, the most powerful man in the Domino Republic turns his gaze toward his country.

“I took the title of ‘president’ to try to teach people otherwise. But most of them keep cheering ‘Long live the new emperor!’ They break open the nobles’ vaults and cry out ‘Long live the emperor!’ as they loot their contents.”

Everyone in the empire had been starving. Ukyou, who had helped them slake that hunger, was trusted for that very reason.

“The people of my country have long forgotten what my ideals were. They’ve forgotten all the crap I spewed about a fair and equal country. They probably never understood what fairness or equality meant in the first place.”

The man was clearly tired of living. But it was also a man who was trying his damned best to hang on, to claw on to hope, a reason to live.

“The people immediately around me are even worse. They think that because they took down the nobility that they’re going to take over. Oh, they won’t call themselves nobles, but they believe they’re entitled to it. They care nothing about fairness or equality, just about building a society that caters to them. Hell, they’re probably not even thinking about society at all. It’s all about their own greed.”

He’s dismissive of his own value, and of his accomplishments. But at the same time, there’s a certain acceptance there.

“They’re supporters worthy of a man who brought down a country for his own selfish reasons, and is planning to slaughter women and children just because they happen to share blood with a man he hates. My revenge took advantage of my people… But in the end, those people were taking advantage of me, too. We’re all guilty.”

“No need to wallow so much, O founding father. You drove out an unworthy king and had the subjects of that land accept you as their new king. You should feel pride, not shame, at your accomplishment.”

Sunae brazenly chastises another country’s ‘king.’ Still, there’s respect buried beneath her words.

“Pride in my power… Perhaps. I know what I did was pretty impressive. I really did think that would be the best revenge. But… This is all power that a god gave me, and that makes it hard…”

“I imagine Dainsleif must have told you to toss them all away, no?”

“…Yeah, she did,” Ukyou replies, nodding at Eckesachs’s question. His expression shows simultaneous disdain and sympathy for who he had once been.

“I came to this world having received four treasures from God. I believed that everything would just go my way. But what I actually found was a bunch of people lusting after my treasures. Not much has changed. I doubt that I, myself, have any value.”

Saiga felt a pang in his own chest upon hearing Ukyou’s self-deprecation and, reaching over, firmly grasps Sunae’s hand. He wanted to feel connected to someone else at that moment.

“Still… I’m here. I have no intention of just tossing it all aside. It’s not yet my time to die.”

His own value comes from the tools that only he can use. Perhaps that’s all he is. But even then, he’s in an enemy country as a head of state. He has a responsibility to fulfill.

“Say, Eckesachs’s master… Saiga, was it? How did you…”

‘Beware, my Master.’

From Ukyou’s back, Ungaikyo issues a warning. There’s a definite tension there.

‘There are several men armed with magical weapons lurking in the darkness!’

Due to her ability to create copies, Ungaikyo is able to recognize and detect the authenticity and abilities of various types of equipment.

Just as the Demon Blade Dainsleif can track targets of revenge, the True Mirror Ungaikyo can classify the things that it sees. It didn’t matter whether it was the middle of the day or the dark of night.

“Just to confirm… Do you intend to kill me?”

“Of course not. If we were to try to kill Elixir’s wielder, we wouldn’t go after him directly.”

By ‘you,’ Ukyou means the House Batterabbe party. Eckesachs quickly dismisses that possibility.

“I haven’t actually done anything to make this kingdom hate me personally, you know.”

It’s true that he had them invaded, but his armies didn’t inflict any damage. And Saiga, the House Batterabbe ace, has no connection at all to House Caputo. Sunae and Tahlan are also from too far abroad to have any connection there, either.

“Which means… These are…!!”

The founding father of the Domino Republic grins fiercely. With an evil enemy to fight, he takes on the demeanor of a revolutionary fighting for justice. Ukyou grows more animated and seems to come truly alive.

“The dregs of the Imperial nobility, eh?!”

Gleaming metal flashes from the darkness.

With a precise vision of the future from his divination, Saiga drops into a battle stance, taking up Eckesachs in her sword form. Tahlan and Sunae also both drop into their stances without hesitation, moving in front of Ukyou.

Part 10 — Engagement

“Maximum Bright Wall!”

“Whoa!”

Using walls of light amplified by Eckesachs, Saiga creates a protective barrier around Ukyou. Encased in those walls, Ukyou is safe, so long as Saiga stays standing.

Even if Ukyou possesses Elixir, there was no such thing as an overabundance of caution. He may not die easily, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be injured.

“Kill that man!”

As though catching on to that fact, the assassins switch their target to Saiga. It’s both the right call and a lethal mistake.

The assassins are garbed in dark clothes and are armed with single-handed swords suitable for an indoor night raid. Still, by wreathing their swords with fire magic, they had a lethality far in excess of what would be needed to kill three unarmored opponents.

“Hrmph! Did you believe such fire would frighten me?”

Sunae had lost to an elite fire mage recently, and the flaming swords definitely caught her interest. No, in fact, they viscerally reminded of that recent loss. They reminded her of her own shortcomings, and of the limits of Spirit Possession. This all served to stoke her ire.

One of the advantages conferred by the power known as Spirit Possession is an extremely tough body, though even with that toughness, fire magic is more than capable of inflicting damage on the user in their giant beast form. However, that’s only true if the wielder of the magic is a first-class mage, and with the assumption that the mage has sufficient distance from the Spirit Possession wielder.

She didn’t need to completely become a giant beast. She only needed to transform about as much as Saiga ordinarily did, enough to cover her entire body with fur. So long as she could boost her physical abilities, the average human would be no match for her. If anything, their choice of weapons went out of their way to advertise their presence in the darkness, and thus made matters easier.

“Graaaaah!”

Wall, pillar, ceiling. Using those locations as stepping stones, Sunae drops in behind them and inflicts lethal wounds with kicks and claw attacks. She fully commands the terrain, a blur of fur and muscle.

“Impressive… I see you haven’t let yourself go.”

No matter how hard he tries, Tahlan can’t match the speed conferred by Spirit Possession. However, his quickness as a swordsman and his aggressive, unhesitating use of Shadow Summoning gives him an impressive fluidity of his own. Tahlan releases three shadows with preset movements, each of them taking down their designated target.

“Not the time for fire magic, and I’m already using mysticism…! Alright! Spirit Possession! Shadow Summoning!”

Saiga uses his Royal Presence for Spirit Possession and his Shadow Presence for Shadow Summoning.

Can his opponents find their way through his attacks? Saiga not only transforms into a beast-man, but he also splits into several duplicates. All of the Saigas ready their legendary swords at waist height and charge in without regard for their safety. The collection of self-sacrificial charges is a simple, effective way for Saiga’s shadows to turn the assassins into pincushions.

“Phew…”

“Too many shadows that time. They’ll end up running into one another.”

“O-Oh, okay!”

As Saiga breathes a sigh of relief, Tahlan offers him some advice. As the shadows have substance, they can always end up blocking one another. That would hardly be an ideal use of Shadow Summoning.

“Oh… Should be alright now. I’ll release the wall.”

“Ehh? The hell are you thinking?”

As the walls of light go down, Ukyou, armed with his four Sacred Treasures, is free to move. Saiga’s understanding of swordsmanship is now at a level that he can tell Ukyou has little in the way of martial training from how he walks. Despite this, Ukyou has an unflinchingly fierce grin on his features, as he goes around stabbing each of the assassins with Dainsleif.

“Stay alert. What’s it called? Zanshin, right? Given your abilities, you need to keep that much in mind, at least.”

Blood from those who had survived and those who hadn’t flows through the air, getting sucked into Dainsleif. It almost appears as though their life force itself is being sucked into the Demon Blade, leaving them thoroughly dead.

“And, ‘should be’ alright? That’s a hell of a claim to make. You’re so sure these are the only assassins in this estate?”

“W-Well…”

In the darkness, Ukyou maintains his predatory grin. Saiga, despite his supposed power, can’t find the words to respond to that expression.

“Mm, it is as you say. Then what shall we do? Our task, after all, is to protect you at all costs.”

Tahlan responds favorably to Ukyou’s raw charisma. A ruler, after all, should be strong and proud.

“That makes things easy, then. I’ll go meet the king and Lord Caputo. Those two are probably at the greatest risk right now.”

With Dainsleif in his right hand and Vajra in his left, Ukyou simply starts walking, as though he already knows where he’s headed.

“The ones who’d be targeted in this estate are me, the king, and Lord Caputo. If any one of us dies, the summit’s off.”

Ukyou guesses that's the aim of the emigre nobles. Whatever the chances of success, if they succeed with even one of their targets, it'll kill off any chance of a successful negotiation. That's something Ukyou needs to prevent at all costs.

"Hahah! This is rather fun, isn't it? Perhaps they're already dead?"

The weakest man in the group, who ought to be standing back behind his protectors, continues stomping his way forward. With a faintly reckless expression, he barges ahead without hesitation.

"...The heck is up with him? Suddenly getting all lively... Showing off even though he's the weakest here..."

"He's a bit like Father, is he not, Sunae? Recall how he would drag the kingdom forward behind him?"

"Yes... He's got quite a lot of spirit."

The other three begin walking after him. His judgment is sound, after all. The king and Lord Caputo *were* the most at risk, and they'd be surrounded by the Royal Guard and Caputo's paladins. As they don't know how numerous the enemy is, the more allies, the better.

"What about your own bodyguards?"

"Saiga, don't expect too much from my people. They may be well-equipped, but this time last year, they were still farmers. If they were caught in a sneak attack, they're dead, and if they haven't been attacked, then they haven't noticed."

Casually dismissing the value of his own bodyguard, Ukyou continues forward. Thanks to the Holy Chalice Elixir, he can smell the best path to survival. Despite appearing to be wandering at random, he's making certain progress toward the other two.

"Still... How did the emigre noble assassins even get into the Caputo estate?"

"Anything is possible with enough time and money. Doesn't have to be bribery. It could be something like taking the sentry's family hostage. So long as there're people involved, there's no such thing as a perfect defense."

Ukyou offers a detailed response to Saiga's casual query. Given his history with overthrowing the empire, his words had an unnerving weight to them.

"But... Have you noticed? It's eerily quiet. I don't hear any sounds of fighting."

"A fair point... This is more than simply lax security. Could this be House Caputo's doing?"

"Well done, Your Highness! Yes, this estate's been stripped of its guards on purpose."

It feels a bit late to have noticed, but there's definitely not enough people here. Even taking into account the fact it's the middle of the night in a place with no electricity, there's not a single guard in sight, despite the

presence of foreign dignitaries. Which means that House Caputo, in charge of the estate's defenses, has their own thoughts on the matter.

"Ahahaha, damn... This is funny!"

"But why... Why would they do that?"

"Who knows? We just have to ask, hm?"

Whether he's angry or laughing, happy or not, the only thing that they can tell from his words is that he's excited. But it's fair to say he can't quite read the intent behind it all. Why would the leaders of the Arcana Kingdom play along with such a stunt?

"I won't die! I've got Elixir, after all! But, even then, to put the king and a great lord's lives at risk? For what reason? Since I can't figure it out myself, the only thing left to do is ask!"

Saiga, with his precognition, catches the approach of enemies from both ahead and behind. It's only natural that their loud voices would attract attention in the dark, quiet building.

"Is he trying to draw attention to himself, to thin the numbers of those attacking the king and Lord Caputo?"

Saiga realizes the plan behind Ukyou's shouting. It's bold, verging on reckless.

"Perhaps some warning would have been appreciated! But I'm more than happy to oblige!"

Tahlan laughs confidently, keeping his composure even in the face of danger.

"I'll be sure to take down those that are coming."

Fighting alongside her older brother and the man she's accepted as her companion, Sunae is intensely driven to be worthy of standing next to them. And the one most likely to suffer if the war continues is Ukyou, the head of the Domino Republic.

Ukyou needs to make certain the king and Lord Caputo survive to avoid any chance of the blame for the assassins being laid at his doorstep. That means he must do whatever he can under these trying circumstances, even if it means drawing the assassins to himself.

Still, it's Saiga and the others who will actually fight them.

"Flanking is meaningless to a Shadow Summoner!"

"Merely surrounding a user of Spirit Possession does nothing!"

Tahlan sends shadows both ahead and behind, while Sunae picks up the yelling Ukyou, making use of all three dimensions to avoid the attackers.

Watching their movements, Saiga charges forward alongside Tahlan's shadows.

"Your mysticism is powerful. Even moreso when reinforced by Eckesachs. As such, you should be confident in its ability to protect you. There is no need to mind that I defeated it; it's pointless to dwell on such things. Your best hand may not necessarily be the right one, but if you understand that your best hand doesn't guarantee victory, then you can use it to create a flow advantageous to you."

He remembers the words from his master, the Sword Apostle.

“The worst situation is a stalemate. You must not get into a situation where you’re evaluating your strength against your opponent’s, or you’ll simply continue to receive their attacks. I don’t mean that you must always keep moving, but make sure you have several potential directions in which you can move at all times.”

In a pincer situation, if the opponent uses a fireball with no regard for their own safety, whatever his own state, it’s possible Tahlan or Sunae could get hurt. That is why Saiga steps forward to take the initiative.

“If you’re going after anyone… Start with me!”

The mystic armor reinforced by Eckesachs… The only person who has ever beaten it is Sansui himself. Since Sansui isn’t present, there’s no way he can lose.

“…There!”

While Saiga offers himself as bait, there’s no reason for the assassins to play along.

Even putting aside Eckesachs, mystic armor is difficult to pierce without the use of heat or lightning magic. Mysticism is relatively common so far as the Rare Arts go, in both Arcana and Domino. As such the measures to take against it are well-known.

“You’re not getting away!”

When fighting a combatant wielding the Mystic Arts, the best solution is to gain some distance on them. Mysticism, unlike magic, has no ranged attack power, making it harmless past a certain point. Further, simply drawing a mystic away from the target they’re defending is often effective in and of itself.

However, Saiga’s precognition doesn’t let that happen. Once he can see that the assassins are showing themselves with the intention of running past him, all he needs to do is send a group of summoned shadows enhanced with Spirit Possession after them.

He deploys them in a straight charge with their swords in hand. The shadows, only capable of simple movements, are thus sent off on a suicide charge.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Wh-What the hell is this?!”

“Ahhhh!”

The shadows kill them all, stabbing them one by one. Still, he can’t let his guard down here. Just as Ukyou stated earlier, it’s important to stay alert, and to make sure he finishes them.

“…Die.”

Once the shadows vanish after executing their preset movements, he lets loose with another wave of shadows. They charge after the assassins on the ground and mercilessly stab them. It’s a ruthless choice, but he can’t afford to let a single one pass, and there’s no time to take any prisoners.

“Good. I knew you could do it.”

That statement catches Saiga off guard. Although he didn't intend to do it, Ukyou pats Saiga's shoulder as Saiga finishes administering his last coup de grace.

"Still, nothing's decided yet. We need to hurry to your king!"

There's no time to savor the moment. Ukyou makes that clear with his body language as he steps forward. A powerful man who took down a country… A symbol of ultimate strength, one that's different from his other definitions of the same phrase...

"So that's what this man is made of. Intensity and youth! You could learn a thing or two from him, Sunae!"

"…Yes, brother."

Sunae nods at Tahlan's words.

Showing a burning intensity of spirit when ambushed and proceeding forward with a clear objective in mind… Ukyou in this state is inspiring. The very image of a brave ruler at the head of his people.

"I need…to keep up."

Saiga, on seeing a hero from a different land, feels not envy, but admiration.

If Ukyou tried to recruit him, he might very well follow him. He knows very well that he can't do that, of course. As the heir to House Batterabbe, he can't simply follow Ukyou. Instead, he needs to be able to stand beside him.

Part 11 — True Intent

“I’m Ukyou Fuushi, President of the Domino Republic! I wish to speak to His Majesty and Lord Caputo! I realize it is late, but stand aside!”

Ukyou arrives in front of the members of the Royal Guard with his three escorts in tow. Though technically Arcanian, they comprise Ukyou’s entire retinue. This particular section of the estate is purposefully and intensely guarded, with fully equipped knights lined up in defense of those within. Ukyou addresses them with his voice raised, as though ready to sic his three guardians on them at any moment.

“Welcome, Your Excellency, we’ve been waiting for you. His Majesty and His Lordship await beyond.”

“Our orders are to allow only you and your Sacred Treasures through.”

Evidently, this was well within their expectations, and the Royal Guard part without complaint. As such, the three guarding Ukyou are now relieved of their burden. Well, at least in terms of their mission to protect him.

“…That’s how it goes. Thanks for the help, you three. From here onward is for the King and I to deal with. That’s the whole reason I came here, after all. Nothing to worry about. Thanks again.”

After parting with words of gratitude and appreciation, Ukyou doesn’t so much as turn his head as he moves into the area beyond the Royal Guard. While it’s impossible not to be curious about what will be discussed within, it’s not something that they should let bother them.

“Well, then! Let’s finish off the remaining intruders in the estate!”

“Yes, I could use a bit more exercise.”

“Alright… This is valuable experience in itself.”

They might not have been able to protect him at his destination, but they can at least take care of the remaining assassins. That would, in the end, be a way of protecting him. Of course, they’re under no obligation to do so, but his charisma made them want to help him in any small way they could. These three have realized that charisma is why other rulers fear him. That is, the only enemy for a ruler is another ruler.

“I apologize for the lateness of the hour!”

With a click, the hero, armed with his four Sacred Treasures, opens the door and enters the room, his irritation plain for all the occupants to see. In the heavily guarded room, two men sip their drinks elegantly. It’s not a party per se, but it’s still an irritating sight for a man who had to fight his way here.

“Seems I’m late to the party. I assume there’s some for me?”

“Yes, we were waiting for you.”

“An impressive show of spirit. You’re hardly the same man we met this afternoon.”

Settling into the empty chair waiting for him, Ukyou takes a drink, as though to cool himself down. With a glint of caution in his eye, he appears fully on edge. At the same time, he's sheathed the Demon Blade on his hip and set the Divine Spear against the wall. Recognizing that only the three of them are in the room, he prepares to exchange words in earnest.

"First, an apology. We, the Arcana Kingdom, recently provided substantial funds to the Imperial nobles residing in our territory. No doubt those funds were appropriated for this purpose."

As expected. Though left unsaid, the apology is clearly just for form. Despite the king's snidely hollow politeness, Ukyou keeps his gaze squarely on him. He has yet to grasp his intent.

"As a symbol of our apology, we shall turn over all of the Imperial nobles presently within our lands. All of them, including women and children. We will, of course, include the wealth they brought with them, and even a bit of interest."

"…I can understand that part. That the nobles are a hassle for you, that is, and you'd like us to take care of them."

This incident is far too large to simply sweep under the rug. For the emigre nobles to try to assassinate Ukyou, who had come at the invitation of the Crown, was a desperate stroke verging on madness. The nobles certainly have no defense. It's also a major failure by the king and Lord Caputo, as they're the hosts tasked with keeping Ukyou safe. Therefore, providing food aid as a show of apology is only natural.

"But what use is that for this kingdom?"

What Ukyou wants to know, above all else is, what the Arcana Kingdom sees as the desirable outcome. The Arcana Kingdom's position was nearly unassailable, after all. Whether continuing the war or settling for peace, there was no course of action in which Domino held an advantage. Yet, in spite of that, the Arcanians are seemingly putting themselves at a disadvantage.

"It's true that they ran amok, but you're the ones who left them to do so. Is it truly worth it to put yourselves at such a disadvantage to toss out those nobles?"

Without much knowledge of the kingdom's internal politics, Ukyou couldn't understand the point. Just what do they gain from providing concessions for the faltering Domino Republic.

"…Hmph, so it seems you understand how to speak in terms of interests. Good, that makes holding this discussion worthwhile."

The king is at least reassured that Ukyou is at least a more sensible opponent than the nobles. An individual who understands that there's a price attached to any form of aid is much more trustworthy than those who take being helped for granted. In some sense it's only natural that the revolutionaries who chased out the nobles would be more capable.

"Allow Us to phrase this simply. We, the Crown of Arcana, want you. You, that is, who can make use of the four Sacred Treasures."

“What sort of ridiculous…”

“With your ignorance of our kingdom’s internal structure, it’s doubtful that you understand the Crown’s feelings on the matter.”

Certainly, there would be meaning in taking away the Sacred Treasures, even if they couldn’t use them, simply as a way of stripping Ukyou of his power. However, he couldn’t understand why they’d want to draw him specifically onto their side, even if he can make use of the Sacred Treasures. It’s like putting a horse thief in charge of the stables.

“Your presence here in the Caputo realm shows us that you are not simply a revolutionary, but also a man capable of governing. That includes your ability to calmly discuss this situation.”

“We don’t know your reasons for bringing down the empire. However, at the very least, His Majesty and I prefer you as a neighbor over the emigre nobles.”

With no intention of completely annexing the Domino Republic, the Arcana Kingdom is recognizing that the man before them must, therefore, be the legitimate ruler of Domino.

“…Isn’t that a contradiction? Sure, I have no wish to take down your kingdom. At the same time, I have no intention of leaving my country. The moment I leave, Domino falls to pieces.”

“We have several unwed daughters. We would like you to marry one of them.”

Hearing those words, Ukyou’s expression changes dramatically. That would allow both sides to get what they want.

“So I stay in my country and become a son-in-law to the Arcanian crown.”

“We’re told that Vajra possesses not only the power to control the weather, but also to forecast it. Our countries are neighbors, and if extreme weather harms one of us, it will also certainly harm the other. As such, We would like you to use that ability for the benefit of both countries.”

Ukyou himself knows better than practically anyone else that, while the act of taking down a regime takes an enormous amount of effort, it also leaves an enormous burden afterwards. That is why the Arcana Kingdom is so keen to avoid annexing the Domino Republic. However, at the same time, they’re more than willing to provide aid for the right reasons. As it’s a favor that can be repaid, they’re willing to lend their help, so long as it doesn’t also completely erode their advantage.

“As things stand, the only thing We obtain in a settlement are Sacred Treasures We cannot use. And if We were to defeat Domino in a war, We’d obtain its depleted land and your enmity. In which case, We have more to gain by giving ground and providing you with aid. If you cannot afford to leave Domino, then remain there and lend Us your aid. That is Our wish as the Crown.”

“…You overestimate me. But I understand what you’re after.”

“However, there is one condition to all of this.”

Domino now owes Arcana in every imaginable way. Despite the fact that they started a war over questionable pretenses, the Arcanians have proposed a peace that's mostly to their disadvantage. At the same time, there is something that the Arcanians need Ukyou to give up.

"The condition is… For you to let a member of the Imperial House go."

They provide a simple explanation. House Sepaeda has placed a young girl of the Imperial House under their care, and they would like him to let her go.

"A member of the Imperial House who escaped to a neighboring country… So, a political rival of the Emperor."

"In essence, yes."

"So, the only survivor of the Imperial House would be the child he wanted dead…!"

Ukyou laughs, as though thoroughly amused. In the end, the reason Ukyou is trying to massacre the entire Imperial House is to get his revenge against the emperor who tried to forcibly take his Sacred Treasures. That was ultimately because killing the Emperor's entire family line would be an absolute denial of his reign as the ruler of the Empire. If anything, leaving a child alive that the Emperor wanted dead would just sweeten the revenge.

"Me, personally, I have no objection to your condition. But as a representative of the Republic, I can't quite say yes."

It's worth noting that there's no one in this world who objects to Ukyou seeking out and killing the members of the Imperial House. If anything, the general view is that he's doing what's expected of a man in his position: killing the ruler and the members of the previous dynasty. By killing anyone with a claim to that bloodline, he removes any chance of it being a source of future rebellion. For a man in his position, it's something that needs to be done, and rather than being an unusual act of vengeance, it is simply part of securing the future of his own regime.

"See, back where I'm from, there was this man named Yoritomo Minamoto. The family that wiped out his clan let him go because he was a child at the time. Unfortunately for them, he grew up to destroy them and take control of the country. It's an inspiring story, but as the potential target of revenge, I'd rather not let that happen."

"That's a perfectly understandable concern."

Of course, Ukyou is fully aware that with circumstances allowing him to completely wipe out the emigre nobles, it's actually quite implausible that Lain could, as an adult, take control of Domino. However, he still believes it's better to kill her anyway. Or rather, there's simply not enough reason for him not to do so. It's true that Lain is an innocent child, but that's true of other members of the Imperial House specifically and the nobility generally. He can't simply swallow the demand as given, and so there's a little more work to be done.

"Letting a single girl go isn't an issue. However, letting her go and having her return…is a potential problem that would haunt my country."

“So have Lain herself or one of her children marry your child. That should settle the matter.”

“That might be true… But why are you so eager to protect this child? Tell me the reason.”

He can’t understand why, under the circumstances, when they’re willing to hand over the emigre nobles, why they’d also be so keen to protect the girl, even if she has been raised by House Sepaeda. Surely they’re not thinking that they can’t afford to let the Imperial bloodline die out.

“The girl, Lain… She is the adopted daughter of this kingdom’s greatest swordsman, Sansui.”

“Is that…?”

“Yes, he is likely from your homeland.”

Ukyou’s face clouds over in thought. Based on his own experiences, it’s likely that this Sansui also has special powers as well. Still, their concern still seems excessive.

“Dainsleif, Vajra, Ungaikyo, Elixir… To explain in terms that they would understand, he is the apprentice of the Immortal Suiboku, the previous wielder of Eckesachs.”

Hearing those words, the heretofore silent Sacred Treasures change to their human forms. They all appear surprised or troubled. Only Elixir appears happy at the news.

“Suiboku’s apprentice…? That obsessive swordsman took…an apprentice?”

“Suiboku has an apprentice… For that man to do something so Immortal-like…”

“The man who snapped swords like twigs…”

“Ah! How wonderful! I see Suiboku is still driven! Splendid!”

It appears that there’s a bit of a gap between the man they knew and the information they’ve been given. Well, perhaps it’s only natural for someone they hadn’t met in two thousand years to have changed a bit in terms of personality.

“He is Suiboku’s apprentice and an Immortal, one who has put in five hundred years of training himself. Frankly, he’s such a calm and humble man that it’s hard to see why he’s sworn fealty to House Sepaeda. At the same time, his skill as a swordsman is without peer.”

Lord Caputo is also a man of faith, and it’s from this perspective that he praises Sansui. At the very least, he’s much more worthy of trust than his own ace.

“This kingdom’s greatest swordsman, eh… An apprentice of an Immortal that’s been around for over two thousand years, and a swordsman that’s been alive for about five hundred years… I can’t even imagine what he’s like.”

All the curiosity drains from Ukyou’s expression. Putting it bluntly, there’s no point in learning about an ace you can’t beat.

“The reason we attacked this country was because we had an excuse to wage war. If you’re going to hand over the emigre nobles — who were the excuse, after all — and add a little extra for the trouble, well, there’s nothing that can beat that. As for marrying one of your princesses, that’s not a bad proposal, either.”

As a politician, he can’t very well turn down an offer after the other party has given so much and with such skillful arrangement.

“I wonder what my country’s history books will say about this war.”

A youngster, overconfident from having taken over his country, got his ass handed to him by waging a war against an opponent he couldn’t possibly beat and, embarrassingly enough, then had that opponent show him mercy. It’s even possible he might have to sign several unequal treaties as a result. It’d certainly be a humiliating experience for a man of his ego.

“Well, screw it, then! At least we’ll be around long enough for there to be history books. The rest, well, I’ll have to leave that to my descendents.”

For better or for worse, lots of working-age citizens had died in this war. To put it another way, there’s now no need to feed them. While he couldn’t hope for better yields from Domino’s fields in the years to come, neither would the dead suddenly come back to life and need food.

“Your Majesty, I accept your offer.”

The young founding father straightened his jacket, then bowed his head. He showed his appreciation to a neighboring king that would, at last, give him a way for his country to survive.

Part 11 — Combat

The fall of the Domino Empire could only be described as a tragedy for the Imperial nobility, those individuals now known as emigre nobles. With no warning whatsoever, a revolutionary equipped with four Sacred Treasures had incited the masses and formed a rebel army. With the use of hollow ideals and promises favoring the masses, he claimed that might and right were on their side. He therefore managed to lure in the mob, who had no understanding of politics, and led a rebellion for his own selfish ends.

As a result, the Empire collapsed. It happened so easily. The Domino Empire, with over three hundred years of history behind it, was brought down by a man who came out of nowhere. The blue bloods thus fled to the neighboring kingdom. Seeking help from their relatives, they defected to their neighbor, even as they dreamed of returning to their homeland.

And so they endured a difficult life in the Arcana Kingdom, biding their time all the while, looking forward to the day that they would sweep back into power in their homeland.

The Arcana Kingdom had the forces to make that possible, and they also had the wealth to restore the Domino Empire. Furthermore, the nobility had secured a survivor of the Imperial House. As such, the Arcana Kingdom could save them, if they so desired.

In spite of this, the kingdom refused to support them, and attempted instead to establish relations with the rebels. They were in the process of acknowledging a mere usurper as their equal. What, then, were the emigre nobles to do?

In a world governed by inequity, were they to simply look back longingly at their past glory and live out the rest of their lives in obscurity? At the very least, *some* of the emigre nobles had not yet given up hope.

“That’s the hut.”

Tasked with assassinating Shouzo, Nuri led the group from the front. The Caputo territories were known for their generosity to the poor. Therefore, that meant there were many desperate people there, and it was easy to hire desperate fools, so long as one had the money.

The fact that the target was a cabin far away from the city may have also made gathering attackers easier. At the very least, it was psychologically easier than preparing to attack the Caputo estate and killing a foreign dignitary.

More than enough money to compensate for the death of a single man had been paid out to the attackers, and that was only the advance. The pay they’d been promised if they succeeded was more than enough to change their lives forever.

“Kill the man in that ramshackle hut. Once he’s dead, you’ll get the rest of the money.”

Having handed over that much money to over a hundred thugs, Nuri still looks troubled. If only he had been able to add the Divine Punishment,

Shouzo Kyoube, to his retinue, he could have taken back his country without dealing with these vermin. Instead, he has no choice but to kill him.

"...Infuriating."

The world's most powerful mage was about to die, killed by a bunch of random thugs. He was going to die in agony at the hands of a bunch of men drawn in by mere pocket change. If only he'd sworn loyalty to Nuri, he could instead have enjoyed prestige and all sorts of rewards.

"'Scarred Fool' is right... Bloody idiot."

Nuri has had advance warning that there aren't the ordinary number of paladins guarding the cabin. He's also aware that the knights usually tasked with protecting the cabin have been sent to guard the estate, with thugs like those he has hired being recruited to fill in the gaps.

"Go, kill him! Don't let him escape!"

They have the advantage of almost double the numbers. Meaning they can use their sheer mass to scatter the rabble, then overwhelm the heavily guarded paladins. He's aware that even he, secure in the back, would be in danger if Shouzo were to use his magic, but he's also aware that Shouzo can't use his spells without House Caputo's permission. As such, he had no doubt of his plan's success.

His perspective was largely correct. At the very least, he had a higher chance of success than the others.

"Alright... Let's go!"

"A'ight!"

"This'll be easy!"

Paupers confident of their brute strength and driven by bloodlust... The emigre nobles who had hired them looked down upon them, of course, but in this case, it was actually true of these particular brutes. As for the small band of mercenaries supposedly guarding the hut they're going after... None of the brutes considered extinguishing their torches to gain an element of surprise. In fact, they've all got lit torches, the shadows exaggerating their numbers as they advance.

Their understanding was that numbers meant strength, and that the mercenaries would run once aware of their numeric disadvantage. Sure, they wanted their money, but not enough to give up their lives for it. They'd be preparing to run if the opponents had equal numbers, and they wouldn't even attempt a fight if there were twice as many of them. As such, they advance with confidence. With their proper understanding of the situation, they were certain of victory and, therefore, mainly thinking of ways to spend their reward.

"They're here."

"Yep, they're coming."

"...Get ready to face them."

The mercenaries assigned to guard House Caputo's ace didn't have rank or privilege, but all of them held their swords without fear. Their features

showed no concern about facing a group twice as large.

There are generally two types of individuals who succeed in life: those that start from the bottom, put in the work, and steadily climb through the ranks; and those that have their extraordinary abilities recognized early on and leap-frog to the top. The greatest examples of the latter are the aces of the Great Houses, including Sansui Shirokuro. Those seeking to follow in their footsteps have gathered in the woods near the academy, forming their own ramshackle community.

“On your guard!”

“Bring it!”

Some are standing around bonfires, others are swinging their swords, while still more sit back to watch the practicing swordsmen. The members of the last group are reflecting on their training for the day over drinks.

“Hyah!”

“Hah!”

One brings a cloth-wrapped stick down in a swing, while the other dodges and counters with a chop. It’s a kind of practice in perfecting one’s form, and it’s hardly anything exceptional. Frankly, it’s a boring form of classroom training. Many of those who had gathered here are those who long ago dismissed the importance of such training in favor of combat experience. They were men who had believed that it was much more valuable to gain the confidence that comes from experiencing as many battlefields as possible, rather than rely on books and theory.

“...Dammit. It’s not hard when we deliberately match our paces, but...”

“It’s a different story altogether when trying to read the timing.”

The timing in this case isn’t when the opponent is going to attack. Rather, the timing that Sansui described is the moment that the opponent is fully committed to their attack or, to put it another way, when the opponent decides to attack. While practicing forms alone is a type of practice swing, when practicing in pairs, it’s about matching timing. Of course, there’s no point in matching the timing itself. No opponent on a battlefield is going to synchronize their timing to your own.

In that sense, Hari wasn’t mistaken to think that the daytime lessons were just lessons in form. Sansui was simply capable of attacking as though he was practicing his form against any opponent at any time.

“Don’t warn me. Just attack me.”

“Yep, alright.”

In a sense, swordsmanship is about nerve. It’s one thing if your opponent is fully armored, but if both parties are unarmored, the relative lethality isn’t particularly different. As such, they know from experience that the side that can attack without hesitation is stronger.

That’s not exactly wrong. However, Sansui stands far above that level. As such, he’s a one-man army, a swordsman without peer, in the realm of total invincibility. A masculine ideal...the ultimate swordsman.

“…!”

“Ah!”

Others watch the pair in form practice with as much focus as the practicing swordsmen themselves. The swordsmen are both tense, making their movements stiffer than usual. Because they’re fully engaged, they’re trying too hard. On the other hand, those who have watched Sansui fight multiple times can easily picture him grasping the moment to strike.

They can see just when Sansui would attack. Still, that’s because they’re on the outside looking in. Even accounting for the fact that they’re only using sticks wrapped in cloth, the knowledge of what it’s like to face off against an actual opponent keeps them from viewing the situation so calmly.

When trying to read one another’s timing, the participants generally couldn’t help but end up in a stalemate. Of course, that’s not an issue if the battle was one on one. However, as Sansui has repeatedly pointed out, it’s impossible to guarantee that in an actual battle. In battle, they’d have to constantly read their enemies’ timing, regardless of how many enemies appeared at once, where they might be positioned, and what they might be armed with. That’s the realm that Sansui occupies.

“I never imagined a man that strong existed.”

“Yeah, I never thought it possible, either.”

It’s not as though they’ve suffered any disfiguring scars. If they could swallow their pride, they could go home and say whatever they pleased. It’s not as though anyone would believe their stories about the Young Sword Apostle or the Lightning Slasher. They didn’t believe those stories either.

But they couldn’t bring themselves to do that. There was a reason why these men, who are unmatched at home, stay near the kingdom’s greatest swordsman. To see his example, and still try to get even a step closer to him.

“So, where are you from? I’m from Sepaeda, though way out in the boonies.”

“Disaea. I just couldn’t stand the stench of the city anymore. Besides, I was getting sick of seafood.”

“Disaea, huh? They prefer things like assassins over there, right?”

“I came over from Domino. They’re handing out ridiculous equipment to every random farmer… There’s no room for advancement there.”

They’re slowly getting better. While they couldn’t make heads or tails of what Sansui was doing at first, now having received his instruction and watched him fight countless times, they’re starting to understand the logic behind his strength and slowly incorporating his ideas into their own styles.

“I tried fighting a guy who just got here recently. Beating him was easier than I thought. I mean, we were both using training swords, but still.”

“I hear you, training swords is one thing… Actual swords are another matter entirely.”

“The master’s just got firmer nerves than we do. It doesn’t matter who he’s fighting; I’ve never even seen him flinch.”

Even if many of them have the ability to wield magic, it’s not as though just anyone can learn it, and those who do might not necessarily have the aptitude for it, and there are plenty who’ve never had the ability to begin with. Still, they sought strength and found a path to it through the sword and, now, they’ve come into contact with a man at its peak.

They, who have experienced their fair share of battles and gained a certain amount of confidence, smile as they look back on the development of their own skills. After all, they have a nearly divine swordsman standing before them, praising them for the progress they’ve made in their skill, and teaching them even further.

“Say, you heard? About the guy with the same hair and facial features as the Master, that is. Evidently, he and the dark-skinned guy are receiving individual lessons.”

“Yep.”

What separates the thread and thrum… It’s not talent, but their goals. Those who picked up the sword and simply sought a path to riches or power, and those that picked up the sword seeking to prove their strength through personal advancement… The difference between them is how they reacted when they ran up against a wall. Did they try to climb over it, or give up and seek another path?

In some ways, it might have been wiser to seek another path. If money was the object, then the sword is the right tool. If they feared death, though, then they shouldn’t fight opponents they couldn’t beat. There’s nothing wrong with living that way, really.

But that’s how the thrum lives. It’s not how thread should live.

There are two types of exceptional individuals. Those who are born that way, and those who aspire to loftier heights and commit to reaching them, no matter their shortcomings. Depending on the circumstances, those seeking those greater heights might be better suited to reaching them. That, too, is a matter of timing.

“A decent show of spirit.”

The ability to see that timing is a valuable ability in itself. Those that are born exceptional won’t seek out danger, after all, because they don’t need to. The ability to give those seeking an opportunity their chance to shine, though… That, too, is a sort of readiness.

“Th-The Lord Emeritus?!”

“Why is the retired lord of a Great House here?”

Swordsmen aren’t the only ones who try to see the larger picture. Whether it’s statesmen practicing politics or generals engaging in warfare, both positions require a perspective even wider than that of the swordsman, while also requiring them to look even deeper. The aged gentleman, appearing with a handful of bodyguards in tow, is gauging the passion of those in front of him. His son, his daughter, and himself… These pupils have

been sharpened by the man that all three of them have put their absolute faith in.

“House Sepaeda’s doors are always open to those who stand on their skill as swordsmen. And when needed, we’ll reach our hands out to you.”

Like the swordsmen who imagine how the ultimate swordsman would act, the old gentleman, too, is looking at something beyond what’s physically present.

“It seems you’re even short on travel funds.”

So far as he can tell, the swordsmen don’t even have the funds for sufficient accommodations, and have instead chosen to live in this sprawling camp together. No doubt these are all individuals who, despite their lack of money, wanted to spend as much time near Sansui as possible.

“I’d like to hire you for a particularly dangerous task, a task that will impact the future of this kingdom for the next hundred years. You will be an important bit of insurance for me.”

‘To hire’ has two meanings, really. One is to hire someone as a day laborer, a purely commercial relationship that lasts just through the one contract. The other is long-term employment, the path to advancement that those assembled here have gathered to seek.

“I can’t use Sansui for this task, and the risks include the possibility of you being wiped out… However, for those that survive, not only will Sansui continue his instruction, but I will pay you. You will become members of a new company.”

The aged gentleman is taking precautions against the outcome he most wants to prevent.

“It’s time you prove your strength in battle, not only as a test of your abilities, but to test whether his instruction has any real meaning to you.”

While there are paladins and Shouzo’s direct bodyguards behind them, they’re not contributing to this fight. No, their role is to defeat this force, one that’s twice their size, on their own. That they can tolerate. No, rather, that’s what they desire.

Those who received Sansui’s instruction are driven by the desire to test the fruits of their training and by the desire to continue training under him. As such, they stand their ground. Not a single one flees nor utters a shriek.

The attacking thugs find themselves suspicious of the band of mercenaries quietly standing under the night sky, swords readied. However, they still have the advantage in numbers, and there’s not much difference in their respective weapons. There’s no reason for them to stop. The thugs hired by Nuri charge, letting out a loud cry.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Battle cries are there to intimidate the opponent and to distract oneself from one’s own fear. No matter how big of an advantage they might have in numbers, at least some of them will die, and there’s the possibility for each person that they, themselves, will be one of those who perish. Even then,

they lie to themselves that it can't possibly happen and, so, they attack their opponents while hoping that they break and run. Hoping that they can, if possible, avoid getting hurt and avoid getting tired.

"They say that those without hesitation survive longest on the battlefield. That isn't wrong."

"In a fight to the death, the first thing you need to fight is your own fear. Without doing that, you can't very well face the opponent trying to kill you."

"Which is probably why the reckless and fearless win. That's not mistaken and there's a logic behind it."

The swordsmen hired by House Sepaeda recall Sansui's words, coldly looking at their attackers who are just like the men they used to be. They almost felt pity for their 'old selves,' the ones driven by short-term greed, buoyed by shallow confidence, blindly confident in their numbers, and distracting themselves from their fear.

"But what if both sides are reckless? Will it be the larger fighters? The better equipped ones? The luckier ones?"

"The one who survives is the winner. But that doesn't mean they're the stronger of the two."

"What is the strength that you desire? Is it the strength to only be able to defeat those smaller than you? Poorer than you? Is strength being reliant on coincidence and fate?"

Both sides have similar equipment, while the opponent has twice the numbers. That fact doesn't change. Ordinarily, this might be a time to run. It's not that they have no fear of death, really, but their duty here is simple. Each of them needs to take down two thugs. That wipes out the enemy. Simple.

The logic that would have drawn derisive laughter from the warriors they were before they met Sansui seems unassailable to them now. Even though they know it's easier said than done, if it's to get a step closer to Sansui, they know they can do it.

"It's true that spirit and morale are important."

"But they represent the bare minimum. There are things you need beyond them."

"The strength that I believe in, my Master's strength, has shown me those things that lie beyond."

"Allow me to show you now."

They feel fear, but they're not afraid. The Sepaeda mercenaries wordlessly meet the horde charging into them.

"Raaaaaaah!"

"Fu..."

A steel sword comes down. A powerful blow that, if it landed, would be a lethal strike. Rather than block it, the mercenary steps back to avoid it. It was a blow that the attacker thought would be blocked or split his target's head. He didn't expect it to miss. A slash missed while charging forward is fatal.

The mercenary chastises himself at the realization that Sansui would have dealt with it without letting the attacker even realize he'd missed. Still, it was enough. The opponent's attack misses, and allows the mercenary to strike upward.

"No...!"

No matter how fearless a person might be, a blow while completely defenseless is enough to make anyone flinch. Despite having had a chance to save himself, if he'd quickly switched over to defense, fear had made even the attacker close his eyes. That's all there was to it.

The mercenary was that way once. No doubt Sansui could have taken down the attacker without killing him. Those are the mercenary's thoughts as he lands a slash against the attacker's neck. Blood gushes from the resulting wound, spraying over the mercenary. Feeling a touch of shame at the sense of accomplishment from his first kill, the mercenary continues onward.

"Damn you!"

He shifts his gaze from the first attacker to the second. The man in front of him, the one holding a lit torch, wasn't fully committed. His eyes give it away. Having hoped that the man in front of him would kill his opponent, he has to take a moment to steel himself to fight.

"Fu!"

"Guh!"

Rather than provide his enemy with that moment, the mercenary strikes first. He doesn't need to put all of his strength behind the blow, just land a quick slash against his opponent's neck. Even if it doesn't kill him instantly, and even if it's not a lethal wound, it'll be enough to break his spirit.

The fear that he'd held back would erupt and rob him of his ability to act, and the bleeding would take precious time away just as he needed those few moments to pull himself together, to formulate an appropriate response.

So the mercenary steps forward rather than finishing his opponent. While he's already taken down two opponents, he sees enemies still in front of him and, so, he continues forward.

"Eek!"

The third's spirit was already broken. Watching his allies get taken down so smoothly was too much for his flagging morale to take.

He might have been harmless enough to leave alone. The third attacker's body was just that tense. But the mercenary strikes anyway. He's not skilled enough to safely leave an opponent unharmed.

"Wh-What the hell are these guys?!"

"Dammit! This isn't what we signed up for!"

"Why are they so stro...!"

The mercenary can't see the entire battlefield like Sansui can. However, just seeing the enemies before him, it appears his comrades are also

overwhelming the attacking ruffians. The tide of battle changes decisively in its opening moments. The attackers quickly break and flee.

There is a substantial difference between those taking a backstep as part of a sword stance and those who try to go from a forward charge directly into turning around and running. A panicked scramble fed by fear and a calm pursuit are vastly different in terms of speed. That means that the fight has gone from a one-sided clash to an even more one-sided pursuit.

“Impossible…”

Nuri is at a loss for words as he watches the battle unfold at a distance. He hadn’t underestimated the odds, and he’d put his best efforts into this plan. Armed with foreknowledge of the enemy, he’d prepared the force necessary and acted accordingly. But that’s all come tumbling down.

“…Are those elites disguised as mercenaries?! It was a trap!”

Watching from afar, Nuri quickly decided to make his escape. Hopping on his horse, he heads away from the battle. It was a quick, accurate decision. Retreating from the battle once it was clear the plan had failed was the wisest thing he could have done. The problem, however, is that now, he doesn’t have anywhere to flee in the kingdom.

Part 12 — Reinforcements

It goes without saying, but there's a substantial difference between standing 100 meters away and floating 100 meters overhead.

"We had them cornered, but now this! This is why I hate mages!"

"No need to fret, my sister. All they're doing is seeking to preserve their advantage."

Having swept through the estate where the heads of state were meeting, the three had almost finished ridding it of the enemy. At the same time, a handful of the opponents they'd cornered had escaped.

The five remaining individuals, who are likely the leaders of the attack have used their magic to fly, taking refuge in the sky overhead. Once securely in the air, they debate whether to continue the operation.

"This is unexpected... That they'd take down almost all of our assassins..."

"What do we do? Should we retreat?"

"And do what, exactly?!"

"That's right; there won't be any other opportunities like this!"

"This is our last chance to take advantage of the confusion within the kingdom!"

The five commanding the estate attack did wonder about the lack of security where the heads of state had assembled. However, they didn't think it was a trap intended to lure them in. Instead, they had convinced themselves that their allies within the kingdom were indirectly supporting them.

It wasn't an impossible scenario. Unlike the Domino Republic, which had no ability to continue fighting the war, the Arcana Kingdom had the ability to fight and win. It was, perhaps, natural that they believed the faction that wanted to win and conquer was trying to disrupt the plans of the faction that believed winning would be too costly by reducing the security at the estate. It never occurred to them that the king and Lord Caputo would purposefully create a situation where they couldn't guarantee their own safety.

In any case, this wasn't a situation that would present itself more than once or twice. If they couldn't get results here, they'd lose their best chance at taking down the hated usurper.

"But what do we do...?"

Whether through wind or fire, being able to fly was the mark of a first-class mage. The five above the estate were all extremely skilled with magic.

At the very least, the three below them couldn't do anything against them.

"What do you think we should do, Eckesachs?"

'Nothing. You don't have the ability to take them down right now.'

While possessing the raw aptitude for every form of magical art and having that amplified through Eckesachs, there were still obviously things

that Saiga could and couldn't do. While he could combine basic techniques, he couldn't accomplish complex tasks that even specialists found difficult.

He could cast fire spells, for example, but he couldn't manage the precise control necessary to fly. While his situation wasn't as bad as Shouzo's, his control of his power when amplified by Eckesachs was too sketchy to allow him to do something like fly.

'The only ways to deal with a flying opponent are to shoot them down using fast moving and accurate heat or lightning spells, or to fly yourself and engage them in close combat. Well, no, there are other methods, but... At the very least, you're not capable of either at the moment. You don't want to imagine what would happen if you amplified your magic with my powers, cast a wide-area fire spell, and missed.'

Though not as ridiculous as Shouzo's power, if Saiga cast a wide-area fire spell amplified by Eckesachs, the outcome was obvious. Since they were on the roof of the estate, they wouldn't be able to avoid setting everything on fire.

"...Dammit!"

'Calm yourself. What is your role?'

"I know, my job is to protect. Just being here has meaning."

It's certainly desirable to either kill all of the assassins or to capture them. However, the important thing is that Ukyou is safe. As such, keeping the elite mages in the air is ultimately the correct thing to do. At the very least, if they can't deal with them, then it's unwise to take unnecessary risks.

"But... It's still frustrating!"

Even Saiga, capable of using many Rare Arts, can't so much as touch those who float overhead. The two Magyan siblings, who can only use Spirit Possession and Shadow Summoning, respectively, certainly can't do anything, either.

The enemy can't exactly touch down on the estate. However, they still appeared to have the initiative under these particular circumstances. So long as they continued facing off in this way, they would win, eventually.

"Those damned escorts. Seems they can't reach us."

"Of course. Flying is a skill that takes both talent and training to achieve."

"Rarity of the Art is hardly a substitute for skill."

No matter how the battle turned out, the attackers overhead would have to be the ones to initiate it. Being safely out of reach from their enemies and capable of talking with their allies... Those conditions gave them a sense of emotional stability.

"Still... The enemy can use the Mystic Arts. Our magic can't penetrate those defenses."

"Can we split them up somehow?"

Worst case, they could simply fly away. Believing in their safety, they didn't notice the gust of wind behind them until it was far too late.

“Fools.”

A blade of wind cuts through them without a sound. Tahlan, Sunae, and Saiga all would struggle against an opponent who could fly. That’s something even an amateur would understand. Which means that the woman who wants Tahlan to survive, no matter the final outcome, has taken certain precautions against that situation.

“You aren’t the only ones who can fly.”

An elegantly dressed knight, a wind magic user armed with a rapier… Douve Sepaeda’s retainer and Sansui’s partner, Blois. Having sliced through the five airborne mages from behind, she slowly lands in front of the Batterabbe party.

While not quite capable of the feats asked of Sansui, Blois, too, is one of Douve's trusted swords.

"As expected... It's much easier without Lady Douve nearby."

Sansui notes this often, but people will still die even if you stab them from behind. It's much more efficient to simply cut down an unsuspecting enemy than to go through the trouble of identifying yourself and challenging them to honorable combat. Going further, there's really no need to ever step into the line of danger. It's the sort of casual complaint that she can mutter because no one's there to listen.

"Ah, if it isn't Dame Blois... That was quite an impressive stroke."

"I had been waiting outside, as Lady Douve had instructed me, to protect you. It seemed you were out of options, so I'm afraid I imposed my help upon you."

It's likely that the five targeted by Blois's spell didn't even realize that they'd died. Her spell had been that sharp. Impressed by that skill, Tahlan doesn't stint in his praise.

"It would be problematic for you to die."

"A bit of a wound to my pride! I feel as though I'm already under her thumb."

To be saved by his deeply respected master's fiancé... Tahlan realizes that this puts him further in Douve's debt. It was a clear showing of the depth of House Sepaeda's bench.

"...It really would be a problem if you were to die."

"You need not say that twice..."

The point is evidently so important to Blois that she repeats herself.

"Thank you, Blois. We owe you one."

"Hrmph... Yes, it was a decent rescue."

Saiga and Sunae add their thanks after Tahlan. They do have their opinions about Douve herself, but harbor no ill will toward Blois, who is only her bodyguard, after all.

As for Blois, she slightly disliked Saiga and Sunae. If the two hadn't gotten together, then Lady Douve wouldn't have made such a fuss about becoming related by marriage to the Batterabbes.

"You flatter me, Lord Saiga, Princess Sunae."

However, since they're of higher station than she is, she makes the appropriate remarks. She is, after all, a thoughtful, chivalrous knight.

"Regardless... Does this mean that Master Sansui is alone in guarding Lady Douve?"

"He isn't completely alone. But either way, I don't believe that will be an issue."

"A fair point. That was an unnecessary worry on my part."

An unnecessary worry... Hearing those words, Saiga once again feels the gulf in ability versus Sansui. The reality is that, so long as he is near Douve

and near Lain, there's nothing to worry about. Whatever happens, he can take care of it. He found himself envying that level of trust.

"Ace, huh..."

The ability to use every type of magical art, and the Legendary Sword Eckesachs, the blade that amplified those abilities... The heir apparent to House Batterabbe, Saiga Mizu... He gazes up at the sky, cursing the lack of skill that resulted in his inability to fly.

"Hrmph... Struggling again?"

"Yeah, I can't help the frustration."

Tahlan, Sunae, Blois... They are all users of different arts, but all three are some of the most skilled wielders of their Arts. They are all accomplished enough to teach others. But Saiga himself still has nothing, and he can't picture where he ought to be in the future.

To be the strongest is an ideal, something to aspire to. But what sort of strength should he seek? Will his strength be an inspiration to anyone?

"I can't do anything on my own. Even working with everyone else, I can't do much. At the very least, I can't do what Sansui or Shouzo can do."

Of course, Shouzo himself can't do anything alone. However, at the same time, his effectiveness is beyond question. As for Sansui, there's no room for debate. Everyone present knows his strength.

"Eckesachs... What do you think I should do?"

"Finding that is what it means to seek strength."

The Legendary Sword Eckesachs, taking human form, thus explains what she's seen in her time. Her days with Suiboku, the man she'd described as the ultimate wielder, and the strength she saw through Sansui after their separation.

"Dainsleif once said that the search for perfection, for ultimate power, was futile. And that it was a desolate and bleak thing for an Immortal who does not age to seek."

That's probably true. For example, if Sansui were to obtain Eckesachs, no doubt he could kill anyone he desired. Shouzo and the unknown Disaea ace wouldn't stand a chance against him. Those present imagine that Suiboku would have been in a similar place two thousand years ago.

"Dainsleif is a blade of vengeance that seeks and eliminates a particular bloodline. That also means that she limits the targets for her wielder's vengeance."

Not satisfied with simply killing an individual, but wiping out an entire bloodline in revenge... That can seem excessive, at first glance. However, that still has an endpoint. Whether it's several individuals or scores, there's still an end to it. There's an end to vengeance. At the very least, there is an end to vengeance for a wielder of Dainsleif.

"However, there's no end to accumulating strength. In particular, there is no end to the strength sought by one who wields me."

In some sense, Sunae was already the most powerful the moment she was born. After all, she had the Royal Presence, the power needed to wield the ultimate Rare Art, Spirit Possession.

Tahlan is already powerful. Having mastered an ultimate technique, he was considered peerless within his own kingdom.

Blois, too, is plenty powerful. She has the ability to become a member of the Royal Guard, the Arcana Kingdom's ultimate elite unit.

As Suiboku noted, if winning a tournament is the goal, then that, too, is a meaningful measure of strength.

"Your problem may be that you can use countless Arts — and you're not sure which to pursue."

Saiga doesn't have anything to his name. While he has a desire for the formless ideal of strength, it's not that he wants to become like Sansui. In fact, he's already thought through the possibility of gaining a moderate amount of skill in numerous Arts and making use of them as necessary. But would accomplishing that satisfy him?

"You have to find what it is you want to accomplish, just as Suiboku did."

There's no one stronger in the world than I. Anyone can say that. However, what are people who have actually accomplished that supposed to do next?

Will they claim all their accolades and spend their days indulging in drink and women? In a sense that's a worthy reward for the effort. It may very well be the dream of all men. However, what should a man who wants nothing more than to climb the next peak do? That was a different question.

"Suiboku, before we met, evidently apprenticed himself to countless Immortals, learning all the forms of the Immortal Arts. He often said that he knew all of the Immortal Arts present in creation."

All those present were shocked into silence. Having actually met Sansui and Suiboku, this revelation was surprising. There's simply far too much of a gap between the image of the Immortal that Tahlan and Saiga knew and Eckesachs' story, and Suiboku himself didn't appear to match up to the latter.

"In fact, he used many different techniques when wielding me, and that made him very powerful."

That must have been around the time that they met the other Sacred Treasures. It was at that point that Dainsleif knew that the relationship between Eckesachs and Suiboku couldn't last.

"With a lifespan, with aging, one can see the end and seek to pass on the torch to a successor. However, at the time, Suiboku had only his own pursuits."

Having learned all the techniques that he could, then having obtained the most powerful weapon, he still sought to become stronger and found himself lost. That is the very situation that Saiga fears he'll face.

“Suiboku chose to rid himself of things. Not simply me, but also the techniques he spent so much time learning. Taking only the things he absolutely needed, he then sought what lay beyond.”

It’s not as though Suiboku had stated this himself, but it was easy enough to imagine having seen how he trained Sansui.

“Suiboku has probably only taught his apprentice a handful of his Immortal techniques: Flash Step, Ki Wave, Feather Step, and Ki Blade. I doubt he even mentioned that others beyond those even exist.”

That must have been the millennium after he left Eckesachs behind. To deny everything that he had been until that point and seek a new path forward… In the end, that had put him back on the right path as an Immortal.

“The first time I saw Sansui’s Flash Step, I couldn’t help but be awed. While Flash Step is a technique to move a long distance in an instant, there’s at least some warning beforehand. But there was none with Sansui. I understood then that Suiboku had severely limited the moves he used, and instead spent his time refining them.”

He then took those refined techniques and passed them to his apprentice. He taught Sansui Immortal Arts techniques that had been specialized and refined for combat, specifically to support an Immortal’s swordsmanship.

“However, what’s necessary and what isn’t? Making that distinction is only possible once you have a certain grasp of the various techniques. When teaching swordsmanship, even Sansui doesn’t immediately start at grasping timing. Remember, he begins with correcting swings. There are many simple things that you only grasp after you’ve reached those heights.”

That’s true. Those training under Sansui have a certain amount of skill and experience. He teaches the concept of timing only to those who don’t need their swings corrected. It’s not as though he starts children off by talking about timing.

“I understand why you’re in a hurry and why you want results. I understand, too, why you’d feel envy at seeing such a complete swordsman in front of you. However, even Suiboku took two or three attempts to find the strength that he truly found to be worthy of his time. It’s fine that you don’t have an endpoint in mind yet, for you still have much you need to do. There’s no shame in struggling. If anything, it’s good that you don’t settle for the easy answer.”

There is no end to training, but the path can end if one is willing to settle. Saiga’s internal struggle is a sign that he’s not satisfied, not willing to settle for his current state. His envy comes from admiration of someone else. That’s the sort of person that Eckesachs will accept as her master.

“I think you’ve already figured this out from the rest, but the Sansui you know is the result of inheriting the answers Suiboku gained in his struggles… But he himself doesn’t know about those struggles.”

He may know the end result, but he doesn't know about the process that created it. Well, that may be the case, but so what?

"...Let me clarify what that means. Understand that Sansui carries on Suiboku's sword skills, but he's still critically short of something else."

It's hard to imagine what, other than firepower, Sansui lacks. Sansui was just that much of an absolute presence to those present.

"Experience. That man had spent centuries practicing. Practice swings will teach the proper form and put on the right muscles. As an Immortal, he can feel people's presence and thus expand his perspective. However, that doesn't confer actual combat experience, and he is thus simply copying his master's example, rather than thinking it through, like you are now."

True, there's a gulf of experience between Suiboku, who had spent years fighting before cloistering himself off in the mountains, and Sansui, who started out training in seclusion.

Still, if Sansui's lacking in experience, it's never appeared that way to anyone else.

"The reason Sansui doesn't seem to lack in experience is because he's been making up for that lack of experience in the five years since he left the forest. That remains the case now. Even after five hundred years of training, he's still in the process of becoming stronger."

Part 13 — Under the Moonlight

To become the guardian of a child emperor… It's perhaps the greatest honor available to those born of noble blood, and a position that provides ample opportunity for personal profit.

They've never seriously considered how to restore the Empire, but it'll happen somehow, and when it does, they need to be in position to reap the profits. That means they need to secure the last scion of the Imperial house.

"Damned Sepaeda… Always mocking us."

Further, the emigre nobles have a lot of pent-up anger toward House Sepaeda. Given the intentional neglect, their anger is perhaps somewhat justified, but either way, it's a perfect opportunity for them to get revenge against the House they hate. Killing Douve, the beloved younger sister of the current Lord Sepaeda… They were looking forward to the opportunity.

The emigre nobles have disguised their personal armies, hired additional mercenaries to fill out their numbers, and are about to attack the Sepaeda estate within the Crown realms. The estate itself isn't very far from the capital, but it is far enough away to give them enough time to finish their task. Even if reinforcements arrive in time, they can leave the mercenaries to loot the estate and draw the pursuers off their scent.

The key, as always, is the emperor. Once they hold the emperor, then everyone will bow at their feet. They themselves have always bowed to the emperor, and they believed it was their turn to receive that homage.

"Listen carefully. Whatever you do, don't harm the young child. As for any young women, you can have your way with them before you kill them."

It might be a premature concern on their part, but it was also realistic. After all, right before them, inside an unwalled estate, sits the last heir to the Imperial crown.

"Heh heh… Me, the Regent, heh!"

With his thugs in tow, the emigre noble makes his way through the darkness to the estate. The moon, almost excessively bright until a few moments ago, now lies obscured behind the clouds. There's just enough light to get by without torches, perfect for a sneak attack.

The several hundred armed men feel the movement of the sky above through the shadows following them across the terrain. Slowly, the estate comes into view. They all take a moment for a steadying breath. Each has to hold back the urge to shout out. There is, after all, an unguarded treasure just within reach.

"Oh dear, it seems we have some late-night guests."

The moonlight completely illuminates the surroundings, joined by lights set up in front of the estate. Lounging there are two highborn ladies, a daughter of House Sepaeda and a daughter of the Crown, sitting in chairs brought outside for this purpose. Flanking them are ten members of the Crown's Royal Guard. In front of them, the kingdom's greatest swordsman stands waiting.

“In the name of the martial House Sepaeda, welcome. It’s so lovely to have such thoughtful guests.”

House Sepaeda’s spoiled princess smiles, not doubting her absolute safety for a moment.

“Sansui.”

“Ma’am.”

The swordsman, who has the power of life and death in his hands, awaits his master’s orders.

“Leave the mastermind alive. Behead the rest.”

“It will be done as you command, milady.”

Today, as usual, I’m providing instruction in front of the academy. However, many of my pupils are absent. Most of them are off on an assignment given to them by His Fathership. They aren’t so well off that they can afford to keep honing their craft without any income. To phrase it differently, the ones who can afford to do that are the Royal Guards pretending to be commoners.

“This means I can devote my time to your lessons.”

“…”

“I’ll say nothing more. Let us make the best of our time.”

“That goes without saying!”

Five of the Royal Guards have surrounded me, looking for the moment to strike. Still, I’m not going to force them to attack. Seeking out the timing, counterattacks, preemptive attacks…all of those are, in a sense, still only part of the way to mastery.

“Waiting for an opening by an enemy you’ve surrounded…I don’t recommend it.”

Surrounding a single opponent with a group of five… That’s certainly the right idea, and ordinarily that would almost certainly secure victory. But that assumes that all five of them are wielding spears and are definitely going to attack first. When everyone is armed with the same kind of practice sword, and are all in high stances, it’s not nearly as advantageous as the numbers suggest.

“Attacking while the target is busy with one of you… There aren’t enough of you to do that.”

Surrounding a single opponent with a group of five… That means taking out the opponent in front of you is enough to break the cordon. I down the opponent in front of me with a slash to his torso, then circle around behind him. That’s all it takes to shatter their formation, and I take down the other four one at a time as they each hurriedly try to face back toward me. If everyone is unarmored, then it’s best to assume agility on the part of both yourself and your opponent, after all.

“As irritating as usual… If we were to attack you all at once, you would read our timing and avoid all our attacks, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, that’s true… But that’s just in my particular case.”

“It’s you we want to defeat.”

I understand their feelings, but there’s no point to surrounding someone if you’re going to give up your advantage. Seeking a counterattack or preemptive attack means you’re effectively ceding the initiative to your opponent. When going to the trouble of surrounding an opponent, I think attacking, even if a bit reckless, is still the right tactical choice.

“And…your timing is still impossible to read.”

“You’re able to do it, to some extent, against other opponents. I’m impressed. However, trying that against me is a bit rash.”

“I know you’re not mocking us, but still…”

My words may be a bit harsh, but their anger makes them too tense when they face me. On the other hand, through their own talent and experience, they are starting to master timing. When practicing against other people, they aren’t just relying on sheer strength, but are instead reading their opponent’s timing to find their opening. In addition to their talent, no doubt they’ve put in countless hours of hard training. They’ve taken to my instruction like fish to water.

“However, you’re all too tense when facing me. As I have said repeatedly, you must be able to do the same swing in practice under any set of circumstances, whether in a duel or in combat. I can understand your feelings, but it means you still have further to go when it shows in your sword.”

“I know!”

Knowing, but not being able to do anything about it… That, too, is a sign they have much to learn. I mean, really, that’s just normal. But overcoming that ‘normal’ also requires more training.

“…I can feel I’m getting stronger, and I understand what you’re saying about timing. Still, we haven’t landed a single blow against you,” the burned Royal Guard says.

I understand his frustration, but I’m pretty sure it’d also be really problematic if just a few lessons allowed them to hit me. It’d make a complete mockery of my own life. My Master evidently noted the same thing, but we really don’t like to lose.

“I know I’m getting tense at wanting to defeat you. The way of the sword is difficult.”

They’re motivated because they want to beat me, but that same desire makes them tense up. Swordsmanship really is difficult, but it’s that difficulty that makes it worth doing. If it was easy to master, it wouldn’t require all this time and effort.

“Let us pause here for now. As… Well, Her Highness is coming this way.”

“What?!”

The five of them are shocked. Well, yes, it’s surprising, but I’m pretty sure I’m even more surprised than they are. Among a group of auras that

feel like Royal Guardsmen, there's a single woman among them with an intense hostility toward me.

Wait, no, Lady Douve is with them, too. She seems rather pleased to see the princess in such a bad mood.

"...You were aware of my approach. Obnoxious, as always."

"Now, now, he wouldn't be worthy of guarding me if he couldn't do at least that."

Lady Douve and the princess arrive with five fully equipped knights in tow.

In fact, it's been several years since I last saw Her Highness. She still seems mature for her years, and her expression is harsh, as always. She's aiming a lot of hostility in my direction.

"It's an honor to see you again, Your Highness."

I bow. Of course, the five receiving my instruction also bow. Given that we're dealing with a princess, that part is expected. Even if they're hiding the fact they're Royal Guards, it's a safe response without any obvious problems.

"...Hrmph. You are vexingly unchanged, aren't you?"

In the intervening years, both Lady Douve and Blois have grown taller than me. But I haven't changed, and I won't change from here on out, either.

"Undoubtedly you have little interest in what happens in this world. Our anger, our struggle, our frustration, our resentment."

"I assure you, Your Highness, I..."

"Does your confidence come from the fact you can kill me at any time?"

Uh oh, she really wants to start a fight. And despite my troubled expression, Lady Douve seems to really be enjoying this.

"You are the strongest, an invincible swordsman, and immortal besides. Not only will I die before you, but so will this kingdom. No doubt once your daughter is grown you will leave this realm, and stay cloistered in your woods, even long after this kingdom is gone, yes? To continue seeking ever higher heights."

She's extremely irritated. I don't even need to read her presence; her words alone are enough. If looks could kill, Her Highness would be the strongest in the kingdom right now. I'd prefer she not show off her royal charisma at a time like this.

"...I suppose that will do. Do you mind if my bodyguards fight your apprentices?"

"They aren't quite my apprentices, but... If they agree, then I have no objection."

She moves on to the issue at hand. Evidently, they were planning on doing this from the start, so the ones I had instructed stand and ready their swords, facing off against the fully equipped knights.

Both sides are very near the top in terms of ability in this kingdom, perhaps in this world. While their equipment is different, they're comrades-

in-arms, with a good sense of their abilities. If there's a difference, it's in the past few months of instruction.

"It appears both sides are willing."

"Oh my... Sansui, which side will win?"

"I'm afraid that I cannot say without actually seeing them fight."

If those I've instructed plan to throw the match to embarrass me, the outcome isn't worth discussing. But both sides seem to be full of spirit. I suppose that's to be expected of such elites.

"Very well, then I will give the signal to begin. Both sides, show me your steel!"

Lady Douve's eyes are focused on the outcome of this match. The only thing she's concerned about is whether the side I trained will win or not. She's not wrong to focus on that, and it seems Her Highness is interested in that, as well.

However, the Royal Guards are in a different position. Rather than considering the outcome, they're more aware of the changes in their opponents. Neither side's ready to call it yet, but they do seem troubled.

"Begin!"

As the princess gives the signal to start, those under my tutelage quickly walk forward to close the distance. By contrast, the fully equipped knights ready their shields and wait. Even with intensive training, there's still a substantial gap in agility between those fully armored in steel and those who aren't. Further, as they're both stopping short of full contact, the armor itself doesn't have much meaning. As such, it's hard to say which side has the advantage. However, that's not the real issue.

"...Explain."

"Yes, will you?"

Both Her Highness and Lady Douve, despite their lack of training, notice the difference. Even though nothing has actually happened, they demand that I lay out exactly what's going on.

"Those five were plenty strong before my instruction. The only thing I taught them was about reading timing in unarmored combat. However, that alone is something all ten of them are capable of doing. The issue is, just what level of opponent can they do it against?"

A step further and someone will get hit. Once at that distance, the armored knights attack. They lift their swords and step in, slashing at their opponents with their swords. The unarmored knights calmly dodge the attack, then step further in, landing a hit on their armored foes' helmets.

"With respect, Your Highness, your bodyguards realized that, no matter what they did, they would be the ones to take the blow."

Facing off five on five, the result is the unarmored party's overwhelming victory. It demonstrates that they've taken to my instruction rather well.

"...I see."

While her expression is level, the princess's feelings add a slight tremor to her voice. Anguish and acceptance, both of them are there. It's also true of the ten Royal Guards.

"Oh dear..."

Lady Douve, please try to at least hide your feelings a little.

"If they fought under the same conditions, there would likely be an even larger gap. The question, however, is whether they can do this in a situation that's not a practice match..."

"They still need further training?"

"Yes."

"But you can do that, yes?"

"...Yes."

At my response, the princess furrows her brow faintly.

"Young Sword Apostle... the Lightning Slasher."

"Indeed... My trusted bodyguard."

"No doubt."

Lady Douve is very pleased to show off my strength. At the same time, Her Highness doesn't deny it. After that, she changes the subject.

"Most of your pupils are in the Caputo realms, including House Batterabbe's ace."

"Yes, that is their duty."

"How confident are you?"

"I do not know. It depends upon their opponent."

I haven't actually been told what's going on over there, and as such, I don't have the faintest clue. I don't know who they'll be fighting and how. It's impossible to guess under these circumstances.

"Depends upon the opponent... I suppose that's fair. That's true of those you instructed, but true of us, as well."

I note her attitude shifting. She's gone from concern about her own feelings to caring about wider matters.

"There is simply too much we don't know about the leader of the Domino Republic. There's nothing else we can do about the situation until we get more information," she says, stating the obvious. While we all know he has four of the Sacred Treasures, we know nothing about his character.

"But he, too, only knows what's obvious. He did invade our kingdom, but he was only doing what he had to. If I had Ungaikyo and an unlimited supply of relics, no doubt I'd also choose to obtain food through invading my rich neighbor."

With this particular invasion, given that House Caputo's ace utterly destroyed the invaders, there's not much in the way of resentment. At the very least, His Brothership and His Fathership had the same reaction, so it's not an unusual opinion among the nobility.

"As such, the outcome is still unknown. We're still blind. This negotiation is as much an opportunity to learn about him as anything else. We would

prefer to draw him to our side, of course, but the Sacred Treasures are picky about their masters. They're loyal…and moody."

Even if there is someone who meets their conditions, they may remain loyal to their previous owner. Having met Eckesachs, that seems perfectly possible. Therefore, the Arcanian royals would prefer getting their hands on the individual who can already use all four of them. That does leave me with a concern, though.

The wielder of the armor Pandora…is he really the equal with his one Sacred Treasure to the man who has four of them? I can't imagine what that item is like.

"In the end, you will end up working with us, as well. You don't need my warning, but stay on your guard."

Part 14 — Beheading

“Instructions on how to kill them. That, too, is fine.”

Under the moonlight, the young man turns his back to his master and looks at his enemy. There’s no nervous tension in his expression, but there is steel in his spine. He doesn’t bother to draw the wooden sword on his hip, and instead walks toward the attackers unarmed. Surprised and caught thoroughly off guard by this unorthodox maneuver, his opponents look around in confusion.

Yes, they’ve attacked with several hundred fighters in tow, but this response is ludicrously small for House Sepaeda. Had they been anticipating an attack, it wouldn’t be impossible for them to have several thousand of their own soldiers lying in wait. The attackers are in a confused panic, gripped with the possibility of heavy cavalry charging at them from all sides.

However, it doesn’t happen. There’s no rumble of hooves across the ground, no whinnies from the mounts, and no shouts from the riders. Well, obviously. They haven’t prepared anything like that. Sansui is here. For just a few hundred hooligans, he’s really almost excessive.

“Well then… How to process them.”

The boy in rough clothing steps closer. Behind him are two apparently highborn women. They’re dealing with an utter lack of information, but one thing is clear. Without securing those women, they’re going to get slaughtered. That understanding is correct, and they begin to run, ignoring the young man and rushing toward the beautiful blooms that might well be their salvation.

Of course, Sansui himself has no intention of dealing with the situation solely with swordplay. He probably would, if the enemy swarmed him specifically, but their targets are the women behind him. That fact determines Sansui’s course of action.

“Get out of the way!”

In front of Sansui is a mercenary trying to shove him out of the way with one hand, not so much as bothering to swing his sword. It’s the right call, Sansui thinks, as he sweeps one of the mercenary’s legs in mid-step. Even that counter-force enough to throw the charging mercenary off-balance, allowing Sansui to snatch the sword from his hand.

It’s not as though the mercenary fell on his face or did a flip; all he did was falter and trip forward. He should have just been able to get his feet back under himself quickly. He should have, that is, but in his confusion, he failed to realize something.

“Good position.”

That he’s in the perfect position to have his head lopped off.

“Oh…”

“Not a bad sword. This will do.”

His head rolls onto the ground and the body follows a moment later. The first victim went down so easily that, in the darkness, in the mad dash, no one around him noticed. It wouldn't have mattered if they had.

Sansui quickly moves with a Flash Step, flanking the advancing group.

"Don't suppose I can get away without using my Ki Blade, given their sheer numbers."

Sansui slashes into the first row of attackers from their side. Although lit by moonlight, the mercenaries turn their gaze to focus on the light coming from the estate. They don't even notice Sansui's slender form, even when he's right next to them.

Using that element of surprise, Sansui leaps upward while sweeping his Ki Blade through a mercenary's neck. He then uses the collapsing mercenary's body as a platform to move on to the next opponent. The iron sword, reinforced with Sansui's ki, slices through the mercenaries' necks as though passing through the air.

Of course, Sansui, as he's jumping along the bodies as though playing hopscotch, has his vulnerable flank exposed, and won't be able to offer much resistance if attacked. However, as to the question of whether a man running along, chasing the back of the man in front of him, could suddenly turn and attack a young man that appears in front of them…the answer is probably no. The most he can process is that the man running in front of him suddenly collapses, his head lolling lifelessly on the ground as blood spurts from his neck.

The man didn't just trip; he fell lifeless to the ground as a beheaded corpse. Knowing that had been the man running in front of him a heartbeat before, there was no way he could keep charging. This is true of all of them.

"Gyah?!"

"Wh-What the…?!"

Deactivating his Ki Blade, Sansui stands in front of them. He simply stands in front of them, no intensity or weight behind his gaze. Under the night sky with the lighting behind him, he's an unnerving sight to see. At that particular moment the mercenaries have the option to flee. Or rather, more accurately, the thought of fleeing goes through their heads.

The young man in front of them doesn't even have so much as a drop of blood from his victims on him. They all succumb to fear at the mere sight of him standing there, bloodless. At the same time, their pride doesn't allow them to run. They can't simply run from a child, after all. It's not a particularly odd thing for them to feel. If Sansui were a bit more flamboyantly powerful, they might have been able to abandon their pride. But all that is irrelevant. Sansui's been ordered by Lady Douve to kill all of the attackers. There's no escape for them.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

It's nothing more than desperation. An overhand slash accompanied by a shriek. It's a panicked, unsightly attack, and there's no spirit behind it. All it

has is a shallow hope that it could somehow change this impossible situation.

Several of the mercenaries try this. A number of them even try to time their attacks together. They all trip as they move, falling forward onto their knees. And everyone aside from them sees how Sansui kills. How, after putting them in the ideal position, he then lops off each head with a single stroke.

"...So, this is what it means to slice off a head."

Tossing aside his damaged blade, Sansui picks up another sword from one of his victims. He then returns to his stance. It's the same stance as a moment earlier.

"Next, to try it as they're standing."

The attackers are frozen in fear at facing this unimaginable monster. While a number of them let out screams, in an attempt to ward off their unbearably strong opponent, the survivors are now, figuratively, headless. But they remain united in their thoughts. All of those present want to flee in fear. They can't understand how their opponent can go around killing so calmly.

Even practice must require a bit more motivation. At least some sort of show of effort, of intensity. They can't understand why they don't see any of it.

"He's just one brat!"

"That's right, don't let him scare you!"

"Kill him! It's not like we have any other choice!"

They try to encourage those around them and distract themselves from their own fear. While this unexplained child is terrifying, they fear the coming of House Sepaeda's forces even more. The only thing to do is move forward, to kill the enemy. But, somehow, they can't bring themselves to do it.

"Screw it! I'll do it!"

Please be intimidated. Please flinch. Please at least show some emotion.

Disguising his fear as anger, the man attacks, offering up desperate prayers and wishes. Sansui casually sweeps his sword up from his side towards the attacker.

"...Eep!"

A grown man flinches at the movement. Those around him also back away, as though Sansui's sword will suddenly, magically erupt. The man standing in front of Sansui holds his sword carefully, as though trying to protect his center. That's how he was trying to guard himself.

Sansui dashes past his flank, then kicks the knee of the man behind him, landing a strike on his exposed neck. His head falls forward, hitting his own sword before landing on the ground.

"Not what I wanted... Sure, I'm managing to take off their heads, but this isn't any different from attacking them in their sleep. I can kill them regardless of where I hit them."

None of them present could see Sansui as he is. Instead, they saw the small, roughly dressed young man as some sort of demonic apparition and, in a sense, they were right.

“Taking their heads off from the front... Beheading an opponent larger than oneself... That’s an entire technique in itself.”

If there’s a saving grace, it’s that they die instantly, with little pain.

“Ahh, ahhhhhh!”

Screams ring out under the moonlight. The attackers can do nothing but give in to their panic. Unable to bear the pressure of having to kill this monster, tired of living in fear, they abandon their thoughts and attack.

All of their attention is therefore focused on Sansui.

“Lightning Slasher...”

The princess appears irritated at Sansui’s performance. An absolute force who, despite being the Arcana Kingdom’s greatest swordsman, isn’t under the command of the Crown. Once again, that force of nature is showing his skill in front of her.

With each swing of Sansui’s sword, another thug’s head falls to the ground. The sight shouldn’t have any particular meaning to a high noble like her, but she couldn’t help but see her Royal Guards in the thugs’ place.

That day, when the honor of the Royal Guard was trampled and replaced by the legend of the Young Sword Apostle... Sansui could have massacred the entire Royal Guard if he had wanted to. He didn’t, out of consideration, but there is no difference to him whether his opponents are mere ruffians or elite soldiers. They are all weaker than him, and there’s no difference in effort in killing them all or leaving them all alive. While he would likely deny it himself, she couldn’t help but think this way. His strength *made* her think this way.

“...Your Highness, do you remember the Grand Commander’s words?”

The Royal Guards, the ones taught by Sansui, couldn’t hold back their tears. Watching the slaughter unfold in front of them, they couldn’t help but be moved to a profound display of emotion. They’re moved because they can’t help but acknowledge just how impressive what they’re witnessing actually is.

‘Why appear now? Why couldn’t you have appeared before me just ten years ago?’

A slash to the neck will kill a person. There are important arteries in the neck, and the throat is required for breathing, of course. Just landing a blow there is enough to be lethal. However, beheading a person completely is another matter entirely. The bones in the neck are thick, and even a steel sword will struggle to entirely decapitate an individual.

That is why an executioner will aim between those bones. They bring down a heavy sword on an immobilized opponent’s most vulnerable spot, with a precision born of sheer practice. Even with an executioner’s skill, it’s not an easy task.

Yet, here is Sansui, beheading moving opponents. Despite being attacked from all sides, despite not using his Ki Blade, he takes off heads in a way that his students can emulate. He kills one after another as he tries to figure out the best way to teach this. He continues beheading opponents with just his sword and his skill, not using any of his Immortal Arts.

“I’m…I’m ashamed, Your Highness. Despite all of my resentment… I cannot help but tremble at the fortune of being able to learn from this man.”

They need to be able to fight the same way they do in practice. Whether in combat, duels, or even pitched battles, they have to be able to swing their sword exactly as they do in practice. That ideal is being displayed in front of them.

There was a man who spent a millennium mastering the Immortal Arts, a millennium wandering the mortal world, then another millennium refining his sword skill. That man has spent five hundred years passing on that sword skill to another. That heir is here in front of them. That heir is teaching them.

“It’s a miracle… There’s nothing else to call it.”

In the span of time covering perhaps a few hundred practice swings, the moonlit plain is filled with headless bodies and a few remaining men paralyzed by fear. And Sansui, of course.

“P-Please have mercy!”

One of the remnants begs for his life, as though he’s forgotten what he had intended to do to the estate and its occupants.

“NO! I don’t want to die!”

A plea to the reaper, coming to take their heads…

“M-Mommy…”

Taking this moment, when it’s too late to pine for home, praying as though their sins never happened…

“…”

Having separated hundreds of heads from their bodies without so much as twitching a brow, Sansui nonetheless takes no actual pleasure from the killing. If given a reason not to kill, he would stop killing them. His objective is to protect his daughter inside the estate and the noblewoman watching from in front of it. That never changes. That never changes…which is why what he does doesn’t change.

“You’re content for those to be your last words?”

He’d spent the last five hundred years watching the cycle of life. Countless lives were brought into this world and departed within the woods, and the mortal world was no different. A human life is still a life. There’s nothing special or unnatural about death. Being beheaded by Sansui is just part of that cycle.

“Sansui, your skill was impressive.”

“You honor me with your praise.”

“But, without witnesses, it all comes down to nothing, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, milady. They may simply think it is an exaggeration.”

“Oh, but Her Highness has seen your skill. So, I guess we don’t need them after all.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Part 15 — Gibbeting

After a night of three simultaneous assaults on three different locations, the morning sees the Sepaeda estate near the academy dealing with the stench of decay. A depressing number of corpses litter the ground in front of the manor house.

“Impressive skill, as always.”

The Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda gazes over the sight in front of him in appreciation. The collection of bodies have all perished from a decapitating stroke. Put another way, they’re unharmed other than the clean wounds to their necks. While there’s some miscellaneous damage from being stepped on after they died, there are no other visible wounds on them. Their killer obsessively targeted their necks. Further, all of the beheadings only took a single blow.

The man who accomplished this is fighting off sleep. While he would ordinarily be up and practicing at this hour, given that he had little time to sleep the previous night, he’s struggling mightily to stay awake.

“Yesterday, he fought without suddenly disappearing from view.”

“Oh?”

“Thanks to that, it was very easy to watch. Make sure to praise him for it.”

Sansui’s greatest asset might well be his ability to disappear in an instant using Flash Step. Since it allows him to vanish from view in an eyeblink, it’s particularly effective in mass combat. Which means that choosing not to use it should result in a substantially less lopsided outcome.

However, that’s clearly not the case. Even against a large group of opponents, he managed to face them without ever leaving their line of sight.

“I take it your ordinary training was of some use?”

“I thank you for your foresight on the matter.”

When doing sword instruction, Sansui needs to make his movements clear to his opponent, as well as any observing students. As a result, he’s had to pick up a technique that he hadn’t needed until that point: the ability to dominate the movements of a group, something that Flash Step ordinarily made unnecessary.

“In the process of teaching my students, I learned how to focus a group’s attention on me.”

It’s a method of taunting the enemy. How to carry himself to discourage attacks, how to carry himself to encourage them… By taking on groups of students, Sansui has picked up those skills. As a result, the act of teaching has wound up being a form of training for him, as well.

“Perhaps, in a way, this is an escape from the Immortal Arts…what my Master called a living blade.”

To avoid the use of techniques like Flash Step and instead deal with a large number of opponents using just the movement and fighting skills from

sword play… Indeed, that's a kind of living blade. A type of swordplay that's theoretically usable by anyone.

"Was the exclusive use of beheading strikes part of that as well?"

"That…was Lady Douve's instruction."

On this point, he seems a bit embarrassed. The Lord Emeritus can't quite understand why. The princess and Douve also see his blush and struggle to comprehend the reasoning.

"The second half was just manual labor. While I didn't fail in my attempts to behead my opponents, I was, perhaps, being a little too clever, a little showy. I let my immaturity come through."

If immaturity is how he describes beheading several hundred attackers, Sansui's standards are thoroughly askew. Still, it was enough of an explanation for the Lord Emeritus. Yes, it's perhaps undesirable from Sansui's point of view.

"Ah, it feels like you were showing off your skill?"

"Yes… I had never tried to intentionally behead someone, so I got a bit lost in it. Not something to be proud of."

Perhaps it's best compared to a strongman using an axe to split a suit of armor in half and bragging about it. While the three listening could understand it, it's not a height they can empathize with.

"It's not that I wish to do shoddy work, but it feels like I put in too much care, so to speak… It's rather tasteless, I suppose. At the very least, it lacked in class."

Soldiers of House Sepaeda have been summoned to the estate, where they're busily disposing of the bodies. They occasionally turn to look at Sansui, then at the bodies being piled into the carts, and couldn't help but agree with his words.

Frankly, it defied understanding. Taking on such a large group of armed opponents alone, and killing all of them by beheading, just wasn't normal. Even if it was on Douve's orders, it's not something that seemed plausible to execute, and to actually see it through to the end is abnormal indeed.

"To take off the head in situations where it's possible…that, perhaps, is fine. But to control the opponent's positioning to deliberately make it easier to behead them…"

The Sepaeda soldiers would, from time to time look at the cross sections of the wounds on the necks and bodies. The precision reminds them more of a butcher's shop than a battlefield.

The blade passed cleanly through between the bones. While there was some strength in the swing, due to the thickness of each neck…even taking that into account, the cross sections were simply too neat. They were so cleanly sliced that it looked less like a beheading and more like a careful butchering or dissection.

Had it just been one or two, that might have been bearable. But all of the heads and bodies showed that same, almost obnoxious attention to detail. Looking at the expressions frozen on the fallen heads, they could confirm

that the dead had felt just as much shock and fear as they themselves did now.

“It’s all somewhat excessive…”

He was ordered to behead them. He thought he could do it without using his Immortal Arts. He tried that, and managed to achieve his goal. In the end, it all felt rather macabre. An Immortal who has mastered the sword clearly has a troublingly different set of values.

“Still, I was able to confirm I have a firm grasp of anatomy. In that sense, this was a good experience. As a swordsman, after all, I need to have a good understanding of human bone structure.”

Hearing Sansui’s explanation, Douve regards his level of commitment with exasperation. From her perspective, her order was intended at most to mean ‘kill them brutally,’ but learning that Sansui had been considering a great many things in his head while executing the order took all the fun out of it. Unable to understand Sansui’s thought process, Princess Setenve has gone quiet, cringing at each of his attempts at explanation.

Sansui himself often makes this point, but an average person will die from a rock to the head. So why does a swordsman need such an intimate understanding of bone structure?

“Of course, to be a true first-class swordsman, one needs to understand more than just bone structure, including musculature, nerves, reflexes, and behavior. Bone structure might just be the easiest to grasp.”

He himself is explaining in detail about the necessity and the Royal Guards near him are nodding in agreement, but even then, the two women couldn’t understand his logic.

“In my case, my lack of height made the angles difficult. There are quite a few joints in the neck and in the rest of the spine, but because of that there’s not much range of movement, meaning there’s very little space to aim when striking. So, to cleanly behead them, I had to step on my opponents or use other attackers as a platform.”

That, they are able to grasp, if barely. It’s true that, when lopping off a head, he usually tripped the opponent or otherwise leapt around.

“The neck is thick, so to fully cut through it without using any form of magic, the strike needs to be a powerful slash with weight behind it, and you need to completely control the opponent’s positioning to avoid damage to your sword’s edge. Further, when tensing under the thought of taking off a head, you put unnecessary strength into the blow. In that case, you can’t take off the head with a single blow, and you’ll wear yourself out before you’re done. When facing several hundred opponents, small mistakes can quickly accumulate into a serious risk, after all.”

To *just* kill the opponent, to *just* take off the opponent’s head… *Just* being able to do that is already quite difficult. To do that against several hundred armed opponents while fighting a running battle would require a level of focus that only Sansui could muster.

“Still, if asked if there’s any rational basis for a sword style where you fight hundreds of opponents and kill all of them with a beheading blow… No, I don’t think there’s any description of that beyond excessively cruel. I suppose I can’t teach this, after all.”

It’s not exactly something that would be useful to those being taught it, either. Even if they’re taught ‘this is how you slice off a head,’ it’s not like they’re going to have a chance to use it within their own lifetime.

“The truth is, after the first hundred, the rest of my opponents were all tense from fear, and there were plenty who had fallen to their knees.”

Fear makes the opponent look larger. By focusing on beheading his opponents, Sansui frightened his opponents into inaction. It was, in effect, a form of intimidation and domination. Frankly, it’s not a very admirable process.

“With my apologies to Lady Douve, I believe this was an excessively brutal and vulgar display, particularly in front of Her Highness.”

As an Immortal who has lived for centuries, Sansui doesn’t consider the beheadings to be particularly immoral; it isn’t as though he inflicted any undue suffering. They had gathered with the intent of harming other people, actually coming to the Sepaeda estate to carry out a night raid. Even if they had been captured alive, it was a serious enough crime that they would have been executed anyway. As such, killing them was perfectly justifiable by Sansui’s logic.

That is why he has no complaints about Douve, who ordered their killing, or those around her, who haven’t criticized her request. Men who came to kill other people ended up getting killed instead… That’s all it was. That’s really why he was so embarrassed at having put so much effort into killing them.

“Focusing on how you kill an opponent is a mistake. It is more than enough to watch the bigger picture, and simply strike the opponents when necessary; don’t you agree?”

Ordinarily wielding a wooden sword in battle, Sansui tends to focus on blows to the head or throat. When taking an enemy’s sword, he will, at times, stab them in the stomach or chest. So, until now he had never been focused on a particular method of killing. He’d always just executed the most appropriate attack for that particular moment. However, if he desired it, if he was ordered to, he could. That best describes Sansui’s current level of skill.

“Still, although I’m glad there’s a lack of offal, this is still a lot of heads.”

Lit by the morning light, he calmly eyes the pile of corpses. All present draw in a breath at his appearance, looking every part the Immortal and Apostle of the Sword.

“If we were to gibbet them, I’m sure it’d be an awful sight.”

What would it be like to describe this incident for the history books? To protect his daughter and mistress, the Sword Apostle took on his enemy,

killing them with their own swords. He was in fine form in the moonlight, and once the battle ended, the heads of the enemies littered the plains.

Could those readers then imagine the current Sansui? Those who know him, having actually met him, find his appearance natural, but those from later generations are probably not going to be able to imagine this swordsman as he is now. Even if his image was left for posterity, they would still only regard him as a bloodthirsty madman.

That is, in the end, what it means to seek to behead all of your enemies on the battlefield. But the reality is a bit more prosaic. While he's far from ordinary, he's hardly crazy.

"Still, my lord, do you believe that matters regarding Lain and Domino are now settled?"

"…It all hinges upon the negotiations happening in Caputo. But you did all we could ask of you. Well done."

At the very least, there's no sense of danger or madness coming from the swordsman. The man capable of killing every person present on a whim was actually extremely calm.

"Now, tell me about this gibbeting you mentioned."

After receiving that question from Lord Sepaeda, Sansui belatedly realizes he should have kept his mouth shut on that matter.

Part 16 — Severe Punishment

It’s true that not all of the emigre nobles in the Arcana Kingdom were involved in this incident. Relatively smart nobles, or those without much ambition, were busy trying to marry into appropriately positioned Arcanian noble families. Those individuals were entirely preoccupied with competing against other emigre noble families and relatively low-ranking Arcanian houses to get their sons and daughters married into the local nobility.

Further, it’s not as though all Imperial nobles lived lavish lives. There were plenty of noble families that were thoroughly exploited by the Imperial House, the upper ranks of the nobility, and the main branches of their own lines. Few of them would have been inclined to return to their homeland, even if the empire was to be restored. After all, their lives back in the empire weren’t anything to be thankful about.

In the Arcana Kingdom, they were treated as victims. That is, they were given relatively decent lives, on account of their status. It was perfectly natural that there would be those who’d want to maintain that way of life. And it wasn’t as though all of the families were properly aware of what was happening. There were those who received word early, others who sought to find out more about rumored schemes, and yet others who dismissed the entire situation as irrelevant. The Arcana Kingdom is vast, and as such, information took time to filter throughout the country.

All of this is to say that while the king has pledged to hand over all of the emigre nobles in the kingdom because of this incident, there are nobles who deserve this fate and those who don’t. At present, the emigre nobles living in the Caputo lands now face repatriation back to their homeland in a manner far different than desired. In preparation for this, they’ve been detained. Not simply imprisoned, even. Instead, all of them have been forced into straitjackets.

“Your Majesty… I don’t have the words to express my gratitude to you.”

They’re now gathered on the plains in front of Shouzo’s cabin. In front of them, the hated usurper is shaking hands with the king.

“Our country was ruled by a foolish Imperial House, exploited by nobles who did nothing but listen to them, and as a result, we wound up destitute. I raised an army in rebellion to fix that rotten political system, but in the end, that only brought further poverty.”

Just what does this little charade represent? That, regardless of the path it took to get there, the Arcana Kingdom has now achieved friendly relations with the new Domino regime.

“I attempted to force that poverty upon this kingdom. Using the excuse that you accepted the defecting nobility, I planned to invade your lands, kill your people, seize their wealth, and take their food.”

The new master of Domino is, with the utmost earnestness and sincerity, gripping the hand of the king, a man old enough to be his father.

“Yet in victory, your kingdom has chosen not to demand restitution, but instead to offer us aid. There are no words to express my gratitude for your magnanimity.”

“It is not for you to concern yourself with. You acted as the ruler of your country must. No doubt, Our Kingdom would have resorted to the same means in a time of need. Fortune simply smiled upon Us this time. You did not act foolishly or rashly.”

The Arcana Kingdom shows Ukyou Fuushi something they’ve never shown to the emigre nobles. That is to say, mercy. Not simply offers of condolences or kindness, but an agreement from one sovereign to another to provide tangible, physical aid.

“Our meeting was most unfortunate. You could not abandon the hunger of your subjects, while We could not let you spill Our blood for yours. But that is in the past. No doubt the Arcana Kingdom will forge a strong relationship with the new Domino.”

“My thanks, Your Majesty.”

Ukyou firmly grips the wrinkled hand, offered in friendship, as tears well up in his eyes.

“Now, We will return the wealth appropriated by the emigre nobles in the form of foodstuffs. You have little use for artwork or jewels at present, after all.”

“Yes, I appreciate that. Thanks to you, my people will survive the winter.”

The contract between sovereigns and the charade that accompanies it is done. With an expression of utter contempt, the king looks down upon the emigre nobles. Ukyou, meanwhile, laughs aloud as he offers his ‘thanks’ to the nobles.

“So, gotta say, I appreciate it. I don’t know how to thank you.”

The emigre nobles, men and women, young and old, lie on the ground in their straitjackets. They somehow hold back the urge to utter curses and wait for an opportunity to plead for mercy. Frankly, dying here would be a mercy in itself. Back in their homeland, they will be forced to shoulder all of the guilt. The suffering that will come from that is something they know better than anyone.

“It was one thing to wipe out the Imperial House, but I actually didn’t plan on taking out all the nobles, too. I did demand your return as an excuse to invade this country, but I honestly didn’t care what happened to you. What I wanted was money, or rather, foodstuffs.”

With the burden of his problems off his chest, Ukyou is now in fine form. He is, to put it mildly, giddy. He showers his appreciation to the ‘poor nobles’ in front of him.

“But in spite of all that, you went out of your way to get yourselves banished... Not only will you help serve as a release valve for all the pent-up frustrations back home, you’re also bringing us plenty of food. I can’t thank you enough.”

The simple fact is that the nobles who defected to the Arcana Kingdom will serve as fodder to secure Ukyou's new republic. By bringing back the emigre nobles and their wealth, the citizens of the Domino Republic will once again acknowledge him as their new sovereign.

"To sacrifice yourselves in order to help me, your sworn enemy...! You are true patriots! Thanks to you, I'll be able to turn things around completely!"

If there was a young woman in love with Ukyou, his display would be more than enough to snap her out of it. But even witnessing Ukyou's vulgar display, the king's contempt is reserved solely for the nobles. He certainly didn't appear to change his opinion an iota in response to Ukyou's behavior.

"Sheesh... Thanks to you lot, it looks like I'll be able to complete my revenge."

A man thoroughly colored by hate and resentment happily offers his thanks to the restrained nobles. In effect, his planned revenge of killing all of the Imperial House, executing the emperor, and running the country in their absence, was now all but assured.

"So, have anything you want to say?"

The elderly sobbed. The children wept. The young could only offer dry, mad laughter in despair. And a man with high influence among the emigre nobles, Nuri, quivered with rage.

"Do you think you've won?!"

At those words, Ukyou's expression sobers.

"Defeating the empire, taking the capital, overthrowing the Imperial system, wiping out the Imperial House, and even killing us nobles. Do you think that means you've won?!"

The man who had accomplished all of that understood what he was trying to say. It was something Ukyou himself understood better than anyone.

"Is your ideal then accomplished, Deceiver?!"

"...You have a point. It may very well be as you say."

The Arcana Kingdom had some sense of Ukyou's strength from the start. That he doesn't have such an overwhelming amount of power that he can bring down a government without starting a civil war, like Shouzo or Sansui do. There was a reason he had to wage that war, after all: he had no other choice. Without the extreme waste of a civil war, he wouldn't have been able to bring down the government at all.

"Do you mean to say that this will bring the lives of plenty that you promised the masses?!"

Lord Caputo and Paulette, listening nearby, couldn't help but feel distress. While it's a ridiculous statement, they also know that truth underlies it.

Meanwhile, the Batterabbe party, now serving as bodyguards, don't understand at all. Obviously, Shouzo is even further in the dark. They don't believe that the Empire was fundamentally evil, really. But, at the same

time, seeing the emigre nobles, it's clear that it was governed extremely poorly. Because they know the nobility of the Arcana Kingdom, the words of the emigre nobles sound only like the frustrated ravings of the losers.

"Do you think you were the only one who endured?! That your masses were the only ones who endured suffering?! That we, the nobility, had no resentment toward the Imperial House?!"

Ukyou listens to the words in silence.

"We didn't believe that all the Emperor did was right! If anything, we knew he made countless mistakes! We suffered under those mistakes as well! But we, too, were enduring the Emperor's rule! But that's because we knew! We knew we HAD to endure!"

Ukyou knows the civil war he began spilled copious amounts of blood. He knows his peasant revolt created countless victims. He knows, too, that the foreign war he started after his civil conflict ended killed innumerable working-age people, and that it caused unbearable pain to their loved ones. He knows better than anyone that he's a deceiver, an imposter, who whispered sweet words into their ears to egg them on.

"The Emperor must be absolute!"

It's not that the Emperor or the Imperial House were special. The Emperors were simply born into the Imperial House, and didn't have anything in the way of affinity for the Rare Arts or any other special hereditary gift. No one believed that all members of the Imperial House were benevolent or particularly capable. But even then, the Emperor had to be absolute.

"Without an absolute sovereign, there's only chaos! Just like what you created!"

They know that the Emperor's reign was sloppy, that his policies were destructive. If anything, them being in the corridors of power or on their periphery meant that they knew this better than the masses ever could. But even then, they had to support the Emperor. To do anything else would split the country. However foolish, vacuous, tyrannical, or incompetent the Emperor might be, to disobey them would cause a civil war. The end result further impoverished the country.

"At the very least, until your rebellion, we weren't struggling so much to need to invade a neighboring kingdom!"

That was the truth. But he knew that better than anyone. With none of his followers around, Ukyou has no need to loudly deny the accusations, which is why he is listening without comment. This is because he started the civil war based on his personal grievance, and there were lots of citizens who died fighting as his soldiers. Even if he provided them with the highest quality of weapons, they were still ordered to pillage.

"Do you really think you've won, Deceiver?! All you did was bring chaos to the country to satisfy a personal grudge!"

"You're right. I haven't won yet. I haven't accomplished anything yet."

At a minimum, he still has to govern. Whatever his title, Ukyou will have to continue governing his country from now on, and there will be no end to that governing. That responsibility continues until another Ukyou comes along to destroy the government. What remains is to rebuild a depleted country.

"Our son."

Those words were ones Saiga heard often, often from Lord Batterabbe.

"Our son, you have an abundance of empathy. From the moment you arrived in Our lands, We noted your extremely strong sense of obligation."

The Arcanian king gently places his hand on the shoulder of Domino's young ruler.

"You pay attention to a great deal of things, it seems. It is reassuring. We can trust you with one of Our daughters."

He's got a silver tongue and is almost exceedingly intense. Those are things a revolutionary needs. There's no need to be merciful, but it's necessary to be able to pay attention to a great many things.

"Now... You have certainly had your say to the man who will marry Our daughter."

"Your Majesty... It is not too late! Do not take this man's hand! He's a man who will even go so far as to bring down an empire to settle a grudge!"

"Indeed. We could not ask for a more dependable son-in-law."

At the very least, the king feels a twinge of envy. Ukyou stated that his actions will be written in the history books. That's probably true, as there's no way a founder of a country won't be remembered. That's something that the king doesn't have. Something that he, only one among a line of dozens of kings, can't hope to have.

"At the very least, he's better than you, who could do nothing but foolishly endure."

"...A subject's proper place is to support his sovereign! If not, the result is the chaos you see in that country! Do you not know what those foolish masses are doing now? They have pushed all responsibility for the hardships in their lives on to us and slake their thirst on our blood! Do you claim to not see this?"

"A sovereign is merely the face of a country."

Although standing atop a different political system than the Domino Empire, the king of the Arcana Kingdom begins to lecture not just Nuri, but all the assembled nobles. No longer tolerating their foolish victim mentality, he thus declares that he will be abandoning the nobles to their fate.

"If the Emperor was a fool, all of his subjects were fools. At the very least, that goes for those who were responsible for ruling the empire."

Having had the king himself declare to their faces that they were all incompetent leaves them dumbstruck. The only man capable of saving them states definitively that they aren't worth saving.

“Let us suppose We were to suddenly pass. There are plenty capable of filling our role. Upon our passing, some other king will rule this kingdom, but their reign would not be substantially different than Ours.”

If an irreplaceable individual is a hero, a state that doesn’t function without that hero in place is not a fully formed state. In the Arcana Kingdom, there are plenty of royals who can take the place of the current king upon his passing.

“That is the same for your empire. If the emperor is rotten, if he is incompetent and foolish, then it means you are all incompetent and foolish.”

There may be several completely hopeless individuals among the imperial or royal families. Royals are still only human, and they won’t all be competent. However, if such an incompetent individual becomes king, what ought to happen? If those around him are minimally competent, they will nudge and push them in a better direction. In the end, whether an emperor or a king, the sovereign is merely the one at the top giving orders.

Even in an absolute monarchy, if no one follows those orders, that’s the end of it. It’s not as though having the title of emperor gives one the ability to brainwash their subjects and make them brainless followers.

“If the Emperor is rotten, then those around him must have been rotten as well. Shall you claim that only the Emperor profited from his misrule? Money is only valuable if it can be handed to others for goods and services. Surely you won’t claim that all of the subjects of the Empire other than the Emperor were innocent victims.”

The defeated Domino Emperor… It’s true that he was a tyrant and only thought about his own personal interests. That’s clear enough from the words of the present nobility. But it wasn’t just the Emperor. It wasn’t just the Imperial House. The profit may have been concentrated around the Emperor, but there were obviously those who shared in the wealth he accumulated.

“You go on and on about enduring, but they rebelled because they could bear it no longer. Your system was brought to its knees. Surely, that means most of the masses could no longer endure it.”

“Even then… Even then, without bearing it, the country is divided! The reality is that Domino now must beg your kingdom for aid!”

“Ah, your foolish ravings about the hundred-year health of the empire. Do you truly think that at some point you will have a great ruler who will restore glory to your empire?”

“Yes, that is what would happen!”

“Ridiculous. Just how many would live to see that world?”

Perhaps the state could endure. By bearing the rule of a tyrant, the state may survive. But people die. Just as the masses feared, the fear that Ukyou fanned, without food, there is no future for the people alive today.

“No doubt you’ll claim it’s irrelevant how many of those subjects die. Perhaps that’s so. But the reverse is true of the masses as well. They hold no great respect for or interest in Us. They may look to curry Our favor, but

they care not what happens to Us in the end, when compared to their own lives."

There are certainly subjects who aren't that way, but they're distinctly in the minority.

"What you will soon experience is just retribution. Return to your country and accept the judgment of your people. If your people found the imperial system wanting and rose up in revolt, the responsibility for their complaints, after all, lays partly at your feet."

The imperial system was clearly flawed, and no one present disputes this. The kindling was already there all around the Empire. Ukyou just happened to be the one who made use of it and lit the fire, but those involved in the political system were responsible for creating those conditions in the first place. And, of course, the nobility are included in those responsible.

"I-I was never involved in politics!" a woman calls out. Through her restraints, she begs for mercy.

"And my children, surely they have no guilt!"

She knew nothing, and couldn't have done anything even if she had known. Her children are even less culpable. It's unjust that they'll be killed as well.

"Why should my child suffer for the sins of others, Your Majesty?!"

"Why do you think one must be guilty to be punished? Do you think by claiming a lack of culpability, you can simply escape punishment?" the king asks, sincerely at a loss at this naivety.

The noble woman has no answer that can address the root of the question.

"Did the children of serfs who starved as a consequence of your foolish Emperor's misrule die because they were guilty of something?"

The simple fact is that the Empire faced heavy poverty. Which is why, when given weapons, the masses immediately went after their feudal lords, because a consequence of heavy poverty is people dying of starvation.

"You are certainly lacking in imagination. You all still don't understand, despite all your learning, that starving people will do whatever it takes to sate their hunger. Which is why you must always be careful to ensure that they are not starving."

When they're starving, people become mere animals. They will beg, they will steal, they will kill, and they will overthrow their government. This should have been obvious, but the nobles hadn't understood this simple fact.

"The poor will always hate the rich. And that's particularly so when they have nothing to eat. They feel rage that others don't know their hunger. You all had enough to eat, did you not? Then, it is time to pay for that contentment."

It's not as though the kingdom or the king himself has any particular hatred of the emigre nobles. They were willing to accept them into the

country when they fled in as refugees. If they had behaved themselves, the kingdom intended to let them settle there. At the very least, they had no intention of using them as diplomatic pawns. However, that changed when the emigre nobles sought the restoration of their empire and tried to drag the kingdom into their machinations.

As Setenve Arcana noted, if there was something for the Arcana Kingdom to gain by helping the nobles, they would have provided a certain amount of aid. However, the emigre nobles had nothing to offer Arcana in return.

In contrast, even discounting the fact the Crown sought to make Ukyou their 'ace,' the potential return from a man capable of controlling the weather for the next several decades was substantial.

In fact, the potential was so great that none of the Four Great Houses could object. As Vajra is so continually quick to note, the ability to control the heavens makes a man irreplaceable. Those in front of the king aren't just replaceable, but their presence is now an active burden.

"This is absurd! Just what do you gain from killing us?!"

But have they actually realized their error? What will their own logic do to their demands?

"Then explain how your survival will profit this kingdom. Just what does Our kingdom gain by letting you live, those that would assassinate Our important assets and kill foreign dignitaries on Our soil?"

"That...!"

"We do not say that all of you present are involved. However, considering the scale of the crimes, simply pleading ignorance is no defense."

You, who would abandon us poor wretches, are heartless and cruel! How easy it would be to say that. But that would be the end of everything. Though, of course, everything is already over for them.

"Hey, your lordships and ladyships," Ukyou says, addressing them with a venomous tone. His smile, however, is completely pure. "What you say is true. I'm a deceiver. I've made that terrible country even worse. I've never claimed to be a king, but even then, I'm sure I'm an incompetent ruler and a tyrant."

He'd known that'd be the result from the start. But even so, driven by a thirst for vengeance, Ukyou chose to take up that banner and start a civil war. To the father clasping their starving child, the mother who couldn't nurse her baby, and the serfs suffering under heavy taxation...he told them that their rulers were to blame and gave them weapons.

"But Domino is my country. There's no place for you anywhere in it."

"How dare you! You are but a child who just happens to possess Sacred Treasures!"

"To borrow your words... If you were to try to restore the old regime, you'd simply cause more chaos."

Yes, Ukyou's actions plunged the country into chaos. The country's economy suffered, and in the end, his mistakes cost them countless numbers of working-age men and women in their prime. At the very least, it's hard to defend against the claim that a youth with exceptional power just took over the country by force.

But there's already a new regime in place. Restoring the old regime would just create more victims.

"So, how do you respond to that point?"

"If we leave the country in your hands, the result is obvious! You can't be trusted to govern!"

"It'll be fine. Looks like I'll be able to pull some pretty capable people over from next door. At the very least, they're a lot better workers than you."

Even if Domino's military consists primarily of untrained peasants, a military alliance between the Arcana Kingdom and the Domino Republic would make other countries think twice. The Arcana Kingdom has Shouzo, while Domino has Ungaikyo. The combination of those two means that no other country can afford to make a careless move.

Still, the issue of internal governance was another matter. In terms of governing the Republic, even pulling promising talent from the merchant families won't be enough. In that sense, restoring some of the nobles might not be the wrong solution.

"So you plan to hand over Domino to the Arcanians?!"

"How's that different from what you were planning?"

Whether as President, Emperor, or King, Ukyou's influence will inevitably decline. He has no choice but to rely on the Arcanians for help in governing. But that's not something that can be helped. Even if the nobles present were restored to power, they'd have no choice but to beg for aid, and to give up most of their power in the process as barter.

Domino is no longer capable of surviving as a state on its own. It needs a certain amount of help from the Arcana Kingdom, no matter what. As such, the Arcanians can choose whether to have the Empire or the Republic.

"There's a difference between letting them rule directly and owing them political favors!"

"Yes, yes, whatever you say. I guess I'll tell this to you one more time. Then you can tell it to your fellow nobles, alright?"

No doubt there were nobles who had to endure the tyrannical policies of the Emperor, and there were surely women who weren't involved in politics and just happened to be born into the noble class. No doubt there were children who had nothing to do with matters of state.

However, they weren't victims to Ukyou. Compared to the thin, impoverished masses that he led, the lives of the nobles were simply far too comfortable. The nobles just happen to be facing a terrible fate at the end of their lives. Up to now, they haven't known hunger. From the perspective of

the masses who had been truly bearing the tyranny of the Empire, that alone is enough to mark them for death.

"Bear it. Even if you die, it's all for the good of the country."

As part of collective responsibility, the emigre nobles are loaded onto the carriages. Some beg for mercy, others swear revenge, and yet more simply weep. If there's one thing they all have in common, it's that none of them were ever able to accomplish anything on their own.

"Say, Lady Paulette, what would happen if we were to help them?" Shouzo asks the young woman who holds his reins.

"No doubt they'd resent us for it," Paulette responds sadly.

Certainly, it's true that not all of them were part of the tyrannical rule of the Empire. Even just saving those without culpability creates problems in itself. Could they really not resent losing their family members? Would they really appreciate being saved?

"And no doubt that resentment would create further conflict."

Frankly, it's also possible that such an outcome wouldn't happen, either. Resentment doesn't automatically explode into revenge. Plenty of people hold on to their grudges and simply take them to their grave. One can't punish people for their thoughts. Even the state doesn't have that right, generally speaking.

But there's a justification in this case. The emigre nobles carried out the three attacks on their own. And among them was a failed assassination upon an estate with the king of the country that had sheltered them. There was the possibility that they could have killed the king, as Ukyou had feared, and that such an action would have been to their benefit.

Therefore, no one could state with certainty that they had no hostile intent toward the king. Attempted regicide was a crime that indeed justified wiping out an entire family. That is why they will all die. They may not all be guilty, but the justification is there. Further, there's simply no reason to let them live.

"I see…"

"Of course, killing them will leave other kinds of resentment, as well. But even then, we must do what we can to reduce the loss of life."

The emigre nobles will all be massacred. That's not in question. With Ukyou wielding Dainsleif, there's almost no possibility of any member of their family escaping. At the very least, the nobles who fled to Arcana are not going to be able to escape.

Yet, even then, there will still be resentment. Whether or not it flares up or remains simmering under the surface is a different question.

"…Shall you hold that against me?"

"No, I'll live with it. This is probably the best course of action."

He watches as many families are hauled off to be killed, but the prospective body count is still much smaller than the army Shouzo massacred. Much smaller, but the guilt still looms large. Yet, in the end, he can accept that it's a small price to pay to end a war.

“Arcana and Caputo are safe. The things I wanted to save are safe. That’s all that matters.”

Who actually gained from this war? In the end, it’s the Arcana Kingdom and the Arcanian Crown. At the very least, the other Four Great Houses have no substantive losses of their own. The three aces functioned as needed, and they got away with essentially no human cost.

By way of contrast, the Arcanian Crown essentially achieved a perfect outcome. In exchange for some food, they’ll be able to send their own relatives into the neighboring country’s center of power. And, above that, they’ll also have four Sacred Treasures at their disposal.

“To try to do anything else… I bet that’s just hoping for too much.”

If he wanted to, Shouzo might be able to save them. But for Shouzo to save them would mean he would have to reduce their country’s citizens to ashes. And further, the Arcanians would eventually have to provide an enormous amount of aid. The cost is simply too high.

“I won’t say not to concern yourself… But, in the end, all they did was flee. They themselves simply didn’t have the fortitude they demanded of others.”

Lord Caputo had prayed that their hopelessness could eventually be redeemed. There was some truth to their claims, after all. Even if they had objected, they likely would have simply been brushed aside by the Imperial House. It would have been very difficult for them to effectively push back against that tyranny.

But they had simply been running. They weren’t enduring anything. They may have logic on their side, but that’s just words. If they had really cared about their country, they should’ve shown that by dying during the revolution, one way or another.

“They have always only cared about themselves. All they said was merely a shallow justification for their behavior.”

It’s not necessarily wrong to be self-interested, but they hadn’t known where to draw the line. Their perspective was so narrow that they had lost sight of everything.

“They took their people for granted. They took it for granted that even if people died of hunger or entire villages were wiped out, that because they were struggling as well, that the people would endure. And that’s true of them now.”

Ukyou made use of the masses. He incited them and lied to them. That’s certainly true, but the Empire had been the ones who’d abandoned them first. It was only because the Empire had abandoned them that Ukyou was able to reach out to them. And even now, after accomplishing his goals, Ukyou kept his hand out to the people.

“Ah, Scarred Fool, there is no need for you to torture yourself with guilt. Everyone simply did what they had to, and those that remain simply fulfilled their responsibilities. Those who are being carried off are simply fulfilling duties they had long neglected.”

After Lord Caputo, the king also comes to reassure Shouzo. Work exists to maintain life, meaning any type of work puts lives on the line. When abandoning that responsibility for self-preservation, the only thing that waits at the end of that path is death. At a minimum, they have to take responsibility for the fact that their neglect cost countless lives, and the fact that their selfishness led to thousands of lives being spent on the battlefield.

"You are the one who has done the greatest work of those present. Because you ended this war without loss to this kingdom, the people can accept that this kingdom is coming to an accord with the Domino Republic," the king says, showing Shouzo his appreciation.

And while perhaps it's simply in the matter of numbers, Shouzo is indeed the one who most contributed to this outcome.

"Of course, the heir to House Batterabbe did well. As did the two royals of Magyan, taking up such an unsavory role. As this kingdom's sovereign, We offer our thanks."

The Crown, to encourage the nobles to carry out their criminal conspiracy of attacking an estate with the king within, had intentionally weakened the security at the Caputo Estate. Even with the presence of Elixir, the only reason they could have made such a gamble was the existence of the Batterabbe ace, Saiga.

There had, in fact, been the possibility that the assassins would go after the king or Lord Caputo to try to destabilize relations between Domino and Arcana. While he's not as absolute as the other aces, Saiga's ability to use amplified mysticism in a fight makes him a far more powerful asset than most.

"Hey. Looks like the last person's finally here," Ukyou says, smiling teasingly.

They can hear cheers coming from the plains. Evidently, the House Sepaeda ace and his party have arrived. No doubt the group that considers him their master are reporting their accomplishments.

It is, in fact, an impressive outcome. A group composed of what were thought to be ordinary individuals took on a similar group of hired mercenaries twice their size and utterly defeated them without a single loss. That alone is an extraordinary achievement. It's a testament to just how effective that man is as an instructor.

"An exasperatingly useful man."

At the king's faintly resentful comment, the carriage carrying the princess, Douve, Blois, Sansui, and Lain approaches.

From inside emerge a haggard-looking Sansui and Blois, as well as an irate Setenve, a chipper Douve, and a confused Lain.

"So she's..."

As Ukyou glances over, Dainsleif shifts to her blade form. Ukyou takes the sheathed blade and places it on his fingertips. As though drawn by a magnet, the sheathed blade turns toward Lain. This was final confirmation of the fact they'd already known.

“I see.”

Approaching was a small girl, no different from the noble children from earlier, except for the single fact that she was Sansui’s adopted daughter. The king, who had previously looked at Ukyou with concern, relaxes when Ukyou’s expression loses its cheer.

In the end, he couldn’t know what Ukyou’s decision would be until he saw the girl directly. As a delicate matter, it had commanded much of the king’s attention. He relaxes, knowing his concern was unnecessary.

“Father, I’m relieved to see you are safe.”

Looking pale and wan to the casual observer, Setenve greets her father.

“Yes… You, on the other hand, look less than well. What troubles you?”

“I’m afraid I witnessed something less than pleasant.”

Having witnessed the Japanese tradition of displaying the severed heads on gibbets at the capital, the intervening few days have yet to dispel her gloom, and she can’t hide her discomfort in front of her father. The subject also brings out a gloominess in Blois, while Sansui thoroughly regrets ever opening his mouth. Everyone other than Douve — daughter of a martial House, seemingly in a pleasant mood — and Lain, who isn’t aware of what happened, are all looking quite pale.

“Putting that aside… Father, perhaps you could introduce your guest?”

Having dismissed her revulsion, Setenve turns her attention to the black-haired, black-eyed man she doesn’t recognize. It depended upon Ukyou, but he was the man that might become her husband.

“This is Fuushi Ukyou, the President of the new Domino Republic.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. Ukyou Fuushi, at your service.”

While his full spirit isn’t immediately apparent, he still has the pride of a sovereign ruler of a country in his bearing as he introduces himself to Setenve.

“Ukyou, this is Our daughter, Setenve.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Your Excellency.”

Setenve appears slightly older. However, that’s due to their ethnic differences. Their actual ages are the same.

“With my father’s blessing, it appears we are to be married.”

“I see… Well, in all honesty, I would like you to come sooner rather than later.”

“May I ask why?”

“Of course. I’m afraid my country has much on its plate. So much so that I’d happily take a wife for the sake of the additional manpower.”

It’s a rather remarkable comment to offer a princess. He may as well be stating that he wants her to simply fill a position in government.

“…I see. I look forward to it, then. I don’t know about my younger sisters, but if I were to marry you, no doubt you will have much more time on your hands.”

“Hah! Well, I look forward to that, then.”

Setenve and Ukyou exchange quick remarks, but Setenve's essentially tells Ukyou that she'll be taking over his country.

"I see you've raised quite a capable woman, Your Majesty."

"Yes. Which has left her unmarried, until now."

"I see. I suppose that makes sense."

There are plenty of arranged marriages in this world; that is, marriages that are based upon politics and interests far outside of the two people getting married. In a sense, that's fate, but it seems that Setenve and Ukyou are rather well-suited for one another.

Part 17 — Meeting

Physical strength, firepower, destructive ability, lethality… In those terms, Sansui can't be said to be particularly impressive. The greatest weakness of a man who would otherwise appear invincible is the fact that, against a sufficiently well-protected opponent, his only option is to flee.

Still, against ordinary human beings with ordinary equipment, his combat abilities are more than enough. That might not be the case if he had to face ten thousand opponents, but anyone who could have mustered that many soldiers could have taken back their country on their own.

"Sigh…"

Sansui's expression is downcast, even in spite of having protected Lain. Blois, hearing the story, falls silent. Together, they're feeling the weight of what it means to serve a martial house.

"Papa, cheer up."

"Okay…I'll cheer up."

He somehow manages to overcome his gloom, and holding Lain's hand, Sansui joins the group, which contains other black-haired and black-eyed individuals.

"Huh… So this is House Sepaeda's ace. You really do look young, wow."

Caputo's ace, the Scarred Fool, Shouzo Kyoube.

"What's wrong?"

Batterabbe's ace, Saiga Mizu.

"I'm feeling a bit…disgusted at where my loyalty lies."

Four individuals capable of threatening entire countries are assembled here. Those in power look upon the gathering and momentarily hold their breath. Seeing them together drives home the fact that they definitely all come from the same country.

"You must be Ukyou Fuushi, the Domino Republic's President. I am Sansui Shirokuro, Lady Douve Sepaeda's bodyguard. This is my daughter, Lain."

"…I am indeed Ukyou. Still."

At the introduction, Ukyou kneels and matches his gaze with Lain. His expression is clinical as he studies her features. At that look, Lain immediately ducks behind her father.

Her actions clearly mark her as being different from the hated Emperor in Ukyou's eyes. He hadn't been able to state without reservation that there wasn't a chance he wouldn't have felt hatred toward her if he'd seen the Emperor in her features.

"Seems she takes after her father. Smart girl."

"Heh… Lately, she's been asking who her mama is going to be."

Ukyou laughs gently in turn, his thoughts turning to the future of his country. This girl's child or grandchild will be marrying his own child or grandchild. That is, assuming he's able to maintain his country for that long.

In all honesty, he thinks that'd be quite an accomplishment in itself. After all, plenty of countries fail after the demise of their founding generation.

"Oh, is there someone you had in mind? Take care of her, then. It's unpleasant to have women who like you die, even if they were only after your money."

For a moment, Ukyou was extremely popular among the ladies in a particular region of the Empire, but he's recently come to the realization that, 'Hey, they were probably only after my money.'

At the time, he thought, 'Huh, looks like I'm a harem story protagonist,' and indulged himself, but his popularity wasn't just dumb luck, but rather because they seriously needed Ukyou, since he could literally make it rain at will and could even adjust the amount of sunlight the land got. That is to say, all of those women approached him after being paid by local powerbrokers.

Still, it's true he enjoyed the attention, and even knowing the relationships were bought and paid for, he still enjoyed those times. It's also true that he considered women to be accessories of a sort, wearing them and showing them off. Even considering the transactional nature of those relationships, having a third party take them from him still filled him with rage.

"As you can see, I'm a simple man. I don't have much to offer in terms of wealth."

"I see… Your body is your wealth, I suppose."

"Yes. I can't thank my Master enough for training me up to this point."

It's a faintly odd conversation, as though they're not quite discussing the same thing. This is, perhaps, appropriate, given that Ukyou, standing at the top of the mortal world, is as far from an Immortal as one might get. Still, it's a reassuringly mellow conversation. A split between these two would have been an outcome disastrous for both of their countries.

"...I thank you for giving up on my daughter."

"Don't take it the wrong way. If I thought she was a target… Well, I wouldn't have given up on going after her, no matter who and where she was."

With that, a bit of his spirit comes through. Existing on the complete opposite end of Sansui's plainness, Ukyou still has an easy to understand manner that brooks no dissent. After reassuring the frightened Lain, Sansui then relaxes at the man's apparent lack of hostility.

"I shouldn't have worried. My concerns were overblown. You and I were never enemies to begin with."

"Then I give thanks to my good fortune."

"You and I both. No doubt killing that girl would be harder than taking down most countries."

The intense man and the calm man exchange looks of understanding. While neither man would ever compromise on certain issues, they also had no reason to clash this time.

“…What a normal Immortal.”

“Yeah, a normal Immortal.”

“How very plain.”

“Hahah! I see he’s willing to do whatever it takes for his daughter! A good man!”

Ukyou’s Sacred Treasures take human form and take a look at Sansui, Suiboku’s apprentice. Having known Suiboku from two thousand years ago, when he was far from a normal Immortal, they’re surprised to find Sansui is actually an ordinary member of the breed.

“Oh… The Sacred Treasures, I presume? You are acquainted with my Master, Suiboku?”

“Indeed. I am Vajra, the Divine Spear, one of the most powerful of the Eight Sacred Treasures! Bow at my power, O apprentice of Suiboku!”

Having been reassured that she’s the most valuable of the four Sacred Treasures, she happily looks down upon the apprentice of one of her ancient enemies. Indeed, given her height, Sansui is, in fact, very small. She couldn’t help but look down on him.

“I, I see…”

“So, whatever you do, don’t use your Immortal Arts to manipulate the weather! Understood?!”

“Huh?”

“You heard me! Don’t do as your master did, taking control of the thunder clouds I summoned and using them against me!”

“…My Master did that?”

Eckesachs lets out an exasperated sigh as though to say, ‘See?’

It’s true that Suiboku once did that against Vajra. He could probably still do it today. However, none of that was taught to his apprentice. At that fact, Eckesachs couldn’t help but be dumbfounded just by how much her former wielder had discarded.

“Indeed he did! As a result, I was destroyed!! I, who control the heavens, was destroyed by a lightning-clad Eckesachs!!”

Please, don’t destroy me again. At the woman’s desperate plea, Sansui can only nod in agreement. Though, the truth is, he couldn’t do it even if he wanted to.

“As a result I had to return to God, my creator! So don’t do that! Understood, Suiboku’s apprentice?!”

“P-Please rest assured, Vajra the Divine Spear. My loyalty is pledged to Arcana, and I have no reason to destroy the weapon of our ally’s sovereign.”

“You said it! Now that you’ve said it, you’re not allowed to do that, got it?!”

Hearing the exceedingly desperate pleas, Shouzo tilts his head in confusion. From his point of view, what Domino was doing seemed illogical.

“Uh, say, Mister President. Why didn’t you use Vajra’s weather control to take down the fortress city? If you just flooded them with endless rain, you could’ve won without bringing an army.”

As another individual whose power was too great for small actions, he couldn't figure out that part of the war. If Ukyou can control the weather, there's no need to mobilize an army to threaten your enemy into submission. So why didn't he do it?

"Oh, that."

"M-Master! There's no reason you must go out of your way to explain my powers to others!"

"Eh, it's not something that needs to stay a secret... Her weather control abilities are still *control* abilities. That means she can't create clouds on a cloudless day or make it snow in the middle of summer."

Ignoring Vajra's pleas, Ukyou explains his Sacred Treasure's abilities. He had, in fact, used the weather control ability to bring down some cities during the revolution. In particular, he used rain to flood out particularly tough fortresses. However, the spear's powers have some stringent prerequisites.

"To make it rain when there's no clouds nearby, I'd have to start by creating clouds over the ocean. Of course, it takes one or two days to build up a storm system like that."

Hearing those words, Shouzo, who could unleash several country-ending spells right now, understood Ukyou's actions. If it takes that much time, flooding isn't an effective plan.

"Worse, I can only control clouds in visual range, so I have to be there on the ground myself. It's not that I didn't consider it, it's that it was never an option to begin with."

Even if he had manipulated the weather and brought down the rain, it's likely Shouzo would have just blasted away those clouds, putting an end to that plan. Perhaps that would have kept anyone at all from dying.

"M-My Master... Still, I am one of the greatest Sacred Treasures in terms of ability! It's just that this man is broken! God went too far when equipping him!" Vajra counters tearfully.

Ukyou decides to simply ignore her. The other Sacred Treasures don't seem particularly impressed, either.

"Ohh... So that's why you passed out weapons... Oh, say, can't Ungaikyo make fake coins? Why not use that to buy food from neighboring countries? I mean, I suppose it's like stealing, but still."

"Unfortunately, that's not an option, either."

In response to Shouzo's other question, Ungaikyo maintains her elegance while explaining why it's not possible. Unlike Vajra, she evidently has no intention of hiding her own shortcomings. That, or she believes that hiding her shortcomings is unworthy of a tool.

"There were quite a few people in the past who used me to counterfeit coins. However, when I create coins, I can't avoid making them lighter than the original. Weighing them would easily show that they're not real."

Why is gold the standard material used throughout the world for money? It's because gold doesn't rust, it's precious, and most importantly...it's

heavy. As such, it's easy to tell when it's been debased by mixing in other metals.

"Of course, it's not as though there aren't those who will accept counterfeit coins, even despite knowing that they're counterfeits. However, this time around, we had to buy enough food to save an entire country from famine. It's not something you can do with small purchases, and more importantly, it needed to be done across national borders."

Obviously, purchased foodstuffs need to be transported from the seller's country to your own. Using enough counterfeit coins to buy the amount of food Ukyou needed wasn't feasible — they wouldn't have been able to get across the border with that much fake money. Even before getting into the question of being treated as thieves, the plan itself was severely flawed.

"I had masters in the past who failed in their attempts to do so. As such, I advised my master about those past failures."

"Huh, I see."

Thanks to the simplicity of the explanation, Shouzo was able to understand the logic. Even he could see how that would fail.

At the same time, Saiga looked at Eckesachs, who's standing near him. While he's being instructed by Sansui, Eckesachs has offered him advice time and again. No doubt that Ukyou managed to succeed with his revolution thanks to the advice from his four Sacred Treasures as well.

"Vajra, you're embarrassing yourself. And embarrassing us fellow Sacred Treasures, as a result."

"Quiet! Unlike you small tools, large tools have a reputation to uphold!"

Ungaikyo looks rather pityingly upon the treasure, who is trying and failing to prop herself up. Objectively, Vajra's flailing is a bit pathetic.

"Rather sad. It's not as though you're that large, either."

Vajra freezes at Eckesachs's remark. Ungaikyo quickly steps away from them. Clearly, Vajra is just moments away from exploding in rage.

"Huh, really, Eckesachs?"

"Indeed, Master. There are three Sacred Treasures not present: Pandora, Danua, and Noah. All three of them are larger than Vajra over there."

Elixir the Sacred Chalice, is the smallest of the Sacred Treasures. Understandable, given she's a chalice made for human use.

Next smallest is Dainsleif the Demon Blade. As she's a short blade, she's not particularly large.

The two-handed sword, Eckesachs, and Ungaikyo, a mirror large enough to show a person from the waist up, are about the same size.

As a ritual spear, Vajra is larger than all of them. Well, perhaps not necessarily larger, but longer, at least.

"They're armor, a storage silo, and a ship. They're all much larger than a spear."

"Oh, that makes sense."

Being the fourth largest among eight hardly qualifies as being a ‘large’ tool. Saiga calmly accepts that critique, but Vajra can’t let that go.

“H-H-How dare you! I, with the ability to control the heavens, am the largest of the Sacred Treasures! It’s not about the physical size of the item!”

“And yet, so petty and small in terms of character.”

“Small and petty?! I am not! Can you not understand my greatness?!”

Those around them have started getting used to the sight of a young woman and a tall woman bickering. In a sense, it’s an argument that comes from being similar beings.

“Oh, say… Not that I’m bothered by being the one answering questions, but while I know you blew away my army, how did you actually do it?”

“Oh, magic. Evidently, I have ten thousand times the mana of a first-rate mage.”

“…A bit more normal than I thought it would be. I figured you had some sort of superpower like a comic or video game character. Mind giving us a demonstration?”

Adding, ‘it’s not as though it runs out, right?’ Ukyou casually asks this of Shouzo.

However, hearing those words, Lord Caputo and Paulette, who had been carefully observing the proceedings, blanch. Sure, it might not be that big of a problem to just fire off a spell into the air. Like Sansui, Shouzo’s power can only be believed once seen. However, he’s powerful enough to easily wipe out a city, and casually authorizing its use wasn’t a good idea.

“We would like to see it as well. We did not see it with Our own eyes, after all.”

The king’s words were perfectly understandable. True, the only ones who had directly seen Shouzo’s power and survived were those of House Caputo. All the others were dead. There are many things that need to be seen at least once. Very rarely do people ask to see them a second time.

“…As you wish, Your Majesty. Shouzo, launch a fire spell into the air above.”

He’s not eager to allow it, but if the king wants it, well, he has no choice. Lord Caputo thus authorizes Shouzo to use a spell, at which point the hex that turns Shouzo to stone the moment he tries to cast a spell is temporarily lifted.

“Okay, fire magic, right? Oh, Saiga, could you go ahead and make a wall of light over everyone? It might be a bit hot, otherwise.”

Unlike the gloomy Lord Caputo, Shouzo seemed entirely at ease.

“A-Alright…!”

Saiga nervously deploys the Eckesachs-amplified wall above the group. Sansui and Ukyou appear eager to witness Shouzo’s otherworldly power.

“Honestly, I’m a little excited.”

“Give us a nice big one!”

In fact, it's the first time the three Japanese men have seen magic on this scale, and that sort of spell is exciting for them, as it's in the style of superheroes they all watched on TV. Those born and raised in this world look up with interest at the sky beyond the mystic wall. Quickly, they all regret their excitement.

"...The hell is this?!" Ukyou stares in shock.

A giant sun appears in front of them. That's the only comparison that works. Fire fills the sky as far as they can see. The thick mystical wall reinforced by Eckesachs seems a thin, insubstantial thing against the fireball above.

"Okay... Now, to shoot it upward..."

At the very least, he no longer panics at his own spells.

Controlling the giant ball of flame, Shouzo flings the spell off high into the air.

It was such a ludicrous sight that even the Sacred Treasures could only stare in dumbfounded wonder. The ultimate spell, unrestrained by hexes, cast by the world's most powerful mage... The enormous ball of flame, normal in all regards other than its sheer power, soars off into the sky above.

With ten thousand times the range of a spell cast by a first rate mage, the spell also has ten thousand times the power. The fireball, mighty enough that it'd probably turn night into day, blazes across the sky, burning away the cloud cover in the process.

"So, this is what killed my army."

At the sheer absurdity of the power shown to him, Ukyou can only muster a tense smile. There's no fighting a war against something like this. It is indeed a card that's strong enough to secure victory.

"No wonder we lost."

At the same time, he empathizes with someone else for the first time in his life. That is, with the sheer fear felt by the people victimized by immeasurable power in the books he used to read. He couldn't have imagined the existence of someone like this. He now understood the unfairness of a world where you can be killed by something you can't even imagine existing.

"It's not that impressive, honest... It's strong, sure, but that's all it is."

Shouzo, with power beyond all reason, seems unconcerned with the awe, doing his best not to take the compliment. Sure, it's strong; it's even remarkable. But so what? It's still just power given to him by God. It means that God is impressive, not him.

Shaking his head as the looks directed in his direction change from earlier, Shouzo looks up at the sky.

"B-Being able to wipe out the clouds doesn't mean...that he can control the clouds!"

"...That's enough, Vajra."

As Vajra tries to put on a brave face in spite of her fear, Dainsleif criticizes her again. There's nothing to be gained from comparing oneself to something like that. There's simply far too large a gap in purpose and scale. Dainsleif, who perhaps has the least impressive abilities of them all, easily accepts this situation.

"Still, such power. A direct hit would probably even destroy Noah."

"Indeed, Dainsleif, that's true. Had Noah been flying above us, those flames would have consumed her and sent her back to God!" Elixir nods firmly to Dainsleif's words.

Even Noah, the toughest of the Sacred Treasures, couldn't simply shrug off that sort of attack. No one offers any disagreement. The rulers and the swordsmen, the mage and the child, all of them watch the fire that ended this war as it streaks across the sky.

However, the Immortal is the one who notices 'something' first.

"...A ship is falling from the sky."

Side Stories

S1 — Origins

This story might have happened ages ago or it may have happened just yesterday.

Sent to this world with four Sacred Treasures in hand, Ukyou had received a hero's welcome in a city ruled by a noble in the Domino Empire. After all, he brought Vajra with him to control the weather and Ungaikyo could create infinite copies of equipment. At the time, Ukyou wasn't particularly skilled in their use, but just the fact that he had four Sacred Treasures was enough to make him valuable.

He felt he was on top of the world. Scores of beautiful women had approached him and confessed their love to him. It would've been hard for him not to be thrilled. But happiness brings overconfidence.

"That took more time than I thought."

'It could not be helped. Master, your sense of defiance is pretty weak at the moment.'

Ukyou was on his way back to the city from a large lake. With the Divine Spear Vajra having forecasted a period of drought, he'd gone to prepare some rain clouds in advance. That itself had gone well, with no noticeable problems.

However, Dainsleif, hanging on his hip, evidently had other concerns on her mind. She thus addressed him in a tense voice.

"Well, whatever. We should be getting back at a perfect time. I'm sure everyone will be really happy to see us~~"

'Spare a moment, my Master?'

"...This again?"

'Yes. It's long past time to let go of us.'

In a deadly serious tone, she made an absurd proposal. She had, in fact, been giving this advice from the start. A single man shouldn't own four of the Sacred Treasures.

"You pouting because you're not being used?"

'No... My Master, you recall that the Emperor who rules this country sent representatives?'

"Yep. Though everyone drove them off."

'...The situation is getting serious. The rulers of this country might very well resort to extreme measures.'

"It'll be fine. The people in charge of that city may be from a cadet branch of a cadet branch, but they've still got Imperial blood."

In contrast, Ukyou was thoroughly unconcerned. He didn't want to let go of the Sacred Treasures he'd been given, and those around him all counseled him against it.

“I mean, the lord said that God gave me four Sacred Treasures to fulfill some great task.”

‘That I have my doubts about…’

As one created by God, Dainsleif had her doubts about how far ahead God actually thought things through. Even if that was the case, it was still a further reason to let go of the treasures.

‘…My Master, even then, you should let go of us. A fate that requires four Sacred Treasures to fulfill must be one of great hardship.’

‘My, my, Dainsleif, are you not delving into matters beyond your station?’

Ungaikyo was usually the one to complain about Dainsleif’s constant warnings.

‘We may have individual will, but we’re still only tools. We’re not Noah or Danua, so it’s sheer arrogance to opine to our master.’

‘Ungaikyo… I understand what you want to say, but is it not a failure for a tool not to warn a master who is on a path of destruction?’

‘Is not the proper role of a tool to stop pushing if their advice is rebuffed?’

The usual argument had begun. From Ukyou’s point of view, Dainsleif’s opinion sounds more correct. However, it’s not an easy thing to accept that sort of warning, which is why he keeps listening to Ungaikyo.

“That’s right, Dainsleif. It wasn’t just my decision not to hand you guys over to the Emperor.”

‘…Still.’

‘You are such a chickenhearted thing for being a Demon Blade of Vengeance, oh Dainsleif.’

Vajra lets out a mocking chuckle. While she controlled the weather and moved the clouds above, she couldn’t help but feel that Dainsleif is overly concerned about minor concerns.

‘Fearing a mere Emperor would keep us from doing much of anything. As Divine Treasures, who were created by God, should not be adding to our Master’s concerns.’

At Vajra’s arrogance, perhaps the right response is a sense of exasperation. But there was something to those words: that he was chosen by God, that he had nothing to fear from a ‘mere Emperor,’ that tickled at his ego. He wouldn’t ever say that on his own, and it’d sound ridiculous to agree with it out loud, but he couldn’t bring himself to deny it, either.

‘A mere Emperor… Still, Vajra. It may go against your purpose, but if you think about what’s best for our Master…’

“As I keep telling you, Dainsleif. The decision not to hand you guys over is one I came to after consulting everyone around me. I can’t just go against them because you told me to.”

When the Emperor’s messengers came to Ukyou, they treated him with utter contempt, going so far as to read out a message saying, ‘Rejoice in the

fact that We deign to honor you with the opportunity for your pathetic self to provide your belongings to Us, as a more worthy owner.'

He had listened, thinking this was normal for this world, but those around him were incandescent with rage. As such, he didn't think his refusal was that big of a deal.

After all, when he simply asked for time to consider the request, the messenger essentially said, 'How dare this monkey refuse the words spoken by me, a servant of the Emperor,' in a much more convoluted way. Ukyou was in no position to criticize him, but he sure seemed to be there to pick a fight. In the end, with the agreement of those around him, he chose to send the messenger packing, and he couldn't bring himself to want to hand over the treasures to an opponent like that.

Thinking back on it, Dainsleif alone had agreed with the messenger at the time.

"Wait... Is it that you don't want me using you? I mean, I haven't really used you, I guess."

'...'

'Now, now, don't tease her so, my Master!' Elixir said, laughing loudly.

Having stayed uncharacteristically quiet until that moment, it appears she decided to intervene in the argument to stop Ukyou's remarks.

'My Master, Dainsleif has always been a thoughtful Sacred Treasure, always thinking about what is best for her master. She's concerned that you, our Master, will suffer the same tragic fates as her previous masters. Try to understand her concern!'

"You say that... But, surely they're not going to resort to force just because they want the Sacred Treasures."

The reason Dainsleif's concerns seem so overblown to Ukyou is that he can't imagine the Emperor sending armies or assassins after him. Ukyou was technically under the protection of a Domino Empire noble, after all. He's been living as an Imperial subject, not as some rebel or bandit.

"Taking them by force means he'd try to kill me and those around me, right? This isn't a manga or anime. Surely they're not that stupid?"

'My Master, you should not think that all who wield authority are wise! In fact, it's quite common for absurdly stupid individuals to sit on the throne!'

"You sure sound like you're talking from experience..."

'Indeed. After all, it's been many centuries since we were created! You should consider us to be experts in human behavior, more so than humans themselves! At any rate, consider Dainsleif's warning to be strictly in the realm of the plausible! At the very least, you should find out what this Emperor is like!'

That remark is enough to make Ukyou worry. It might be best to talk this over again once they reach town. Thinking this, Ukyou increased his pace on the way home.

To put it simply, there was nobody left where the city had once been. The smell of smoke lingered from the remains of burned out buildings, and charred human bodies were all piled up in a single location...

There was a sign written in Imperial letters posted in front of the city.

"...Can you read this, Elixir?"

'Indeed, I can. It's very long, but to summarize, it says...'

"We have punished those who rebelled against their rightful sovereign and attempted to hoard the treasures of God for themselves. Burials and memorials for this city's inhabitants are forbidden, and those who disobey will be considered guilty of the same crimes."

The rain clouds brought about by Vajra's powers, rather than coming down as a bountiful rain, simply began to soak the fool who hadn't thought things through. It wasn't a light shower, but a heavy rain that could have been useful for farming. The rain soaked Ukyou, who had fallen to his knees, and had started washing away the soot from the burned-out city.

"...Could this be a lie?"

'No, random bandits wouldn't prepare a sign this impressive.'

'And...while I hate to say this, my Master... This city was relatively well prepared. The only ones who could do this would be a sizable detachment of the Imperial Army...'

Elixir and Vajra confirm that Dainsleif's worst fears were now reality. The destruction was simply too thorough for it to have been bandits or an invading army. There was no need to so thoroughly massacre the inhabitants if the goal had been plunder.

"So that means...that means that this city really was destroyed on this Emperor's whim? Because I didn't hand you over to him?!"

What sort of ridiculous logic is that? Even if the Sacred Treasures were divine relics, they're private property. To burn an entire city and kill its inhabitants because he couldn't have them? Would a ruler really do this to his own people?

"This city...it had so many people here. So many people were living their lives here. All they wanted to do was live in peace! Why? Why did they have to be killed by their own rulers?!"

Had his refusal to hand over the treasures resulted in punishments to those who'd helped him or the city's rulers... He probably would have admitted his error and handed them over.

But this... This was simply beyond the pale. He knew he'd done wrong, but this level of punishment wasn't anywhere in line with the crimes. He couldn't feel sorry for his own actions or responsible for the outcome. The only things he felt were grief, sadness, and rage. Feelings that he'd never forgive the state, the society, or the Emperor for, as entities who would do this sort of thing.

'...My Master. It is my fault. If only I had more warned you more firmly.'

"You did nothing wrong... This isn't your fault!"

Dainsleif felt the raw bloodlust of vengeance take hold within Ukyou. Vajra felt a strong sense of defiance take hold within Ukyou. Ungaikyo felt a commitment to use any and every tool take hold within Ukyou. Elixir felt an absolute refusal to bend take hold within Ukyou.

“I won’t let them get away with this! I CAN’T let them get away with this!”

Purpose is unrelated to happiness. If anything, it can drive happiness further away. And a powerful fate will drag in everyone and everything around it. It would be several years later that Ukyou finally brought down the Domino Empire.

S2 — Fate

The Arcana Kingdom’s dark underbelly, the region where the flotsam and jetsam of the nation comes together…that’s Disaea. In this region, where almost all of the vices imaginable for mankind are available through the use of copious bribes, it’s the repository of all the sewage that people all want to keep under wraps.

Of course, that means there are countless acts that happen in that territory that go against common decency and humanity. The weak are exploited by the strong, and the exploited try to exploit those even weaker than themselves. It’s hardly unusual that one might see that society and feel a distaste for it, even a justified hatred.

“You Shun Ukiyo?”

In a particularly flourishing city within Disaea, on a gently sloping hill that looks down upon the city, a man addresses Shun.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

With Pandora standing behind him, Shun regards his interlocutor as a nuisance.

“I hear you’re a cheat-equipped bastard who’s sucking up to this country’s rulers.”

“Suppose you could say that.”

“…I’m Nen Souten. I’m a Japanese man who recently arrived in this world.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I had been in another world called Eigumbe until now. There, I killed the mad god ruling the world, and took out his followers as well.”

“…Uh-huh. And? Are you here to brag about this? Then go off to a bar and pay some woman to listen to you. The only thing your stories about what you were doing in some other world will do is put me to sleep.”

The boredom, the resentment. It’s far too obvious in Shun’s attitude. Nen is clearly irritated at this.

“I destroyed everything that pissed me off! The ridiculous caste system, the religion that demands others die for it, the society that couldn’t recognize its mistakes, I destroyed them all!”

“And?”

“And the thing I hate most is men like you!”

It could be that he’s thinking of someone from his past. Remembering someone like Shun and directing his hatred at him, that is.

“Those bastards living in that damned city are bad enough, but you, a guy from Japan, who profits from all of it and blends into that den of thieves…! I detest bastards like you!”

He has a point. Shun doesn’t deny he’s profiting off of it, after all. He also doesn’t deny that the city is dirty, or that he’s favored by the rulers. Nen’s anger is understandable. With his strong sense of morality, he feels nothing but anger at Disaea.

“I’m going to end you! Then, I’m going to destroy that damned city, too!”

“Uh-huh.”

“…The hell is up with your attitude?!”

“I have no intention of justifying myself to you, but let me ask you something.”

Shun tries to count the number of women behind Nen, but gives up after the first few.

“Those women behind you. They important to you?”

“They are!”

Tall ones, short ones. Winged ones, horned ones. Ones with large breasts, ones with small breasts. Ones with large rears, ones with small rears. Ones with holy auras, ones with evil auras. Ones showing lots of skin, ones not showing much. Heavily armed ones, unarmed ones.

They were a diverse collection, a tiresome set of all sorts of examples. They were clearly not residents of this world.

“How many of them are there?”

“Twenty-three!”

“…What are you here to do?” Shun asks out of exasperated curiosity. They don’t look like a group following a man about to destroy a city.

“Are you looking down on them?! They’re much much stronger than you!”

“…Uh-huh. Another question, then.”

Shun asks a question very important to him. Indeed, it’s a question that will determine the outcome of what is about to happen.

“Do you think that your precious women, your precious people, won’t die? Not even going that far, do you think that they won’t even get hurt?”

“You’re underestimating us, aren’t you? I don’t know what it’s like in this world, but our world has resurrection magic. We’ve faced death countless times!”

“…”

This won’t do. Shun abandons any hopes he had of Nen.

“What about you all? What do you think?”

Which is why he asks the women behind him.

“Do you think about the possibility you might die, or those around you might die, or that this man might die?”

“…There was a time when we did.”

One of the women, perhaps their leader, speaks.

“That we’d trade our lives to kill the enemy, or sacrifice our lives to protect Lord Nen… We thought we couldn’t accomplish anything if we didn’t do that. We thought that, with our lack of strength, that was the only way we could accomplish anything.”

She has a great strength to her gaze. A strength born of an unwavering ideal.

“But now things are different! Lord Nen explained that there’s no point to any of it if we can’t all come out alive! That there is meaning in all of us surviving!”

Her expression is one with a confidence backed by experience and achievements, one that’s conquered both weakness and fear.

“So you see, we’re strong… We don’t think about whether we might lose, or whether we might die, or might get hurt, or might never see each other again!”

Nen prepares for battle.

“That’s what it means to be strong… We won’t lose anything, we’ll gain all we desire, and accomplish everything we set out to do!”

At those words, Shun directs a gaze of utter disappointment at them.

“Uh-huh. Then you’ll all die. Your fate ends here.”

“We’ve overcome fate countless times!”

Around the same time, Lord Disaea was meeting with a Japanese woman.

“So you’re the one who wants me to hire them…”

“Yes! I’m Byoubu Kakejiku!”

Answering in an energetic voice is a lively, short-haired woman. With slender, long limbs, she clearly looks athletic, and has a certain androgynous beauty. In a word, she’s a young woman who looks better in pants than a skirt.

“Why do you want to work for me?”

“I heard you pay well!”

“I see…”

“I’m afraid I’ve only got what I have on me, so if you don’t hire me, I’m going to have to work at some rather more shady places… So, I would really appreciate it if you’d hire me.”

Both of them are seated as the interview continues. Old Man Disaea had already decided to hire this young woman.

He didn’t know to what extent yet, but no doubt she had gifts from God, and he could always fire her later. And while it depended on her own personality, not all the work Disaea did was shady. It wouldn’t be a problem to give her the time to figure out where she was best suited.

“Oh, very well.”

“Yay! Thank you so much!”

“I’m sure our boy Shun could use some sane countrymen to talk to.”

“Shun… Is he from Japan?”

“Mmhm… And perhaps it’s the fate of one given the power to control Pandora by God, but he has a tendency to draw in those with dangerous ideologies…”

The old man himself deals with countless idiots from his own country on a daily basis, so he understands how frustrating that can be. Even if it’s just a single person, he wants someone he can have a decent conversation with. He understands that he himself is unusual, but he still expects normalcy from his conversation partner, even if he realizes it’s a sort of arrogance to do so.

“As we speak he’s dealing with guests from Japan… No doubt it’ll be over quickly, however.”

At the very least, the woman in front of him is not one who would mess with the world to satisfy her own whims.

Since she’s not the sort of irregularity that even the gods dislike, it’s worth trying her out, for now.

“The reason that people talk is because they want understanding. The reason people don’t listen is because they don’t want to understand the other person’s views.”

The bodies lay in heaps. The women who had been there just moments ago have been transformed into ghastly corpses.

“You sure went out of your way to babble all sorts of nonsense, as though you really wanted me to understand. You know you’re stupid, but to brag that you’re strong enough to force through your stupidity? How pathetic.”

“Y-You…”

The last one standing is, as perhaps would be expected, Nen.

The women he loved have been reduced to unspeaking objects. Clutching one of them to him, he stares in shock up at Shun, who is now garbed in Pandora.

“How…how dare you kill my women! I won’t…! I won’t ever forgive this!”

“Go on, I don’t want your forgiveness,” Shun says, calmly, blandly uttering words of disappointment.

“I told you several times, but at the very least, you need to do that if you’re to attack me. I don’t know what sort of world you were in, or what sort of magic or weapons it had, but if you’re going to attack me, you need to abandon any hope of living.”

Pandora, the Armor of Disaster… The man wearing her speaks a brutal truth.

“To attack me, you need to let go of your desire to live. If you’re willing to abandon all that you’ve acquired in an attempt to take me down… Then you might, if you’re lucky, hit me with an attack. Though, really, it’s too late for that now.”

“…Wh-What the hell does that mean?!”

“All lives are worth the same. Whether it’s random insects, the woman you’re clutching, me, or the people you’ve killed along the way, they’re all the same.”

“S-Screw you! They’re not the same!”

“They all die in the end.”

There are only two things in this world that can interfere with fate. Elixir, the Sacred Chalice of Will, that provides the power to stand up to fate, and Pandora, the Armor of Disaster, the destroyer that stands as a monument of fate unto itself. And regardless of either, there is nothing that is eternal, undying, or infinite.

“Strength protects life, protects from loss, protects from failure, protects from losing. Even if that was true, why do you assume that such a state of affairs would continue on forever? It doesn’t matter. None of it matters.”

Destruction comes eventually. Eventually, everyone has to give up and face destruction.

“Even if you were the strongest, that doesn’t matter. There will be a time that you’ll end. Even if you were to turn things around here and win, there will always be an unhappy end.”

“I…I loved them… They were dear to me… We were happy!” Nen screams out in protest, weeping in sadness. “Why would you take that from me?!”

“No matter how happy you are now, it will eventually end. And those under the delusion that they’re different, that they’re the exception, will be absorbed by Pandora and killed.”

“They…I made all of them happy! They had faced nothing but hardship in life! But…! And you just…!”

“Those who don’t understand that they’re mortal, that they’ll die, that they’re going to die now, and yet seek to try to accomplish anything in the moment that remains… In front of Pandora, they’re powerless.”

From the start, Shun, clad in Pandora, hasn’t moved from his original spot. He looks to his opponent with a thorough lack of interest.

“It’s far too late for you to try to tell me something. You and I can no longer do anything. If you really desired that your happiness continue…”

Thud. Something collapses.

“Then you wouldn’t have brought such a thing to the battlefield.”

With that, Shun takes Pandora off.

“No, that’s not right. If you didn’t want to lose something important to you, then you shouldn’t have let anything be important to you in the first place. I suppose that’s the only real option.”

Leaving those words for the corpse of the lucky man who had survived until the very end, Shun makes his way back to the thoroughly corrupted city.

S3 — Training

This is a story that took place when Lain was still a baby.

While in House Sepaeda's lands, I was being questioned by a stern looking Arte Sepaeda, Lady Douve's mother.

"Sansui. What sort of training do you ordinarily do?"

It was a perfectly reasonable question. I am, after all, her daughter's bodyguard, and no matter my skill, I look like a child. As my employer, it's her duty to criticize me if I was to neglect my day-to-day training. Other than my time spent guarding Lady Douve and when I was asleep, I generally spent my time training. That is to say, I haven't been neglecting my daily training.

After all, I'd spent five hundred years doing nothing but training. It's not just a part of my life; it pretty much *is* my life. As such, if asked whether I was neglecting my training, I could confidently declare 'no.' On the other hand, it's a bit harder when the question is 'what sort of training do you do?'

"I…I take practice swings."

"The foundation of swordsmanship. While I have no experience myself, I'm aware that the basics are extremely important."

While her words are complimentary, Lady Arte's expression is extremely harsh.

"I have already seen your skill. To have achieved such ability at your age and still remember the importance of the basics is quite impressive."

"…You honor me."

"Now, what else do you do for your training?"

"…I'm afraid my Master never authorized me to do anything else."

I was instructed by my Master at the very start to do practice swings from dawn to dusk, with the stipulation that he'd eventually tell me when I'd done enough. Even on the day I picked up Lain, he hadn't told me to stop.

"If I recall, the Master who taught your swordsmanship also taught you your Rare Art… Your…Immortal Arts, yes?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"…It is good that you are loyal to your Master's teachings, but as your employer, I cannot help but feel some concern."

Well, that's understandable. No matter how studiously I'm training, hearing that I only do practice swings has to be a bit concerning.

"We cannot prepare an instructor for your Rare Art, your Immortal Arts. However, as House Sepaeda is a martial house, we will have some input into your swordsmanship training."

Her words were very polite, but they brooked no dissent. Without a reason or the nerve to disobey, I could only nod without a word.

Lady Arte takes me to an outdoor training ground. A large number of young soldiers are running, swinging swords, or engaging in training matches. Blois was there as well, training among the grown men.

I don't doubt she's a genius when it comes to swordsmanship and magic, but even then, she's clearly putting in figurative blood…no, she's actually bleeding from her sword hand, so literal blood, sweat, and tears. Their intensity is worthy of a martial house.

"They are the elites of House Sepaeda's standing army. They may not be quite at the level of the Royal Guard, but they are all first-class soldiers with a strong dedication to their craft. You have leap-frogged them and now serve as my daughter's bodyguard. With that fact in mind, join them and train."

With that, Lady Arte handed me a training sword. Seems I'm not going to be doing anything like running around, but instead taking part in practice matches.

"I understand, my lady."

Now, I'm an Immortal and a swordsman. While I can use the Immortal Arts, I've also spent five hundred years training my swordsmanship. Which is why, even just fighting normally with swords, I'm not going to lose. I'm confident enough in my ability that I'm sure I won't lose to anyone but my Master. However, is there really any meaning for me to overwhelm these soldiers with my sword?

I'm sure they'd all be surprised, and feel fear and revulsion that there's a child this powerful. But what's the point of that? What's the meaning in defeating soldiers of House Sepaeda, the house that will be caring for me and will be raising Lain?

What's the point of embarrassing these hard-working soldiers, having them live through the shame of losing to a child, and one who's a foreigner, to boot?

"I will do my best."

I'll put up a decent fight, then lose. It might be disrespectful, but it's better than humiliating them. There might come a day when I have to show off my true strength and go on a rampage, but now's not that day. That'll come after I've raised Lain to be an independent woman, returned to report to my Master, then put in more training.

A hundred years from now, two hundred years from now… It might even be a thousand years from now. But Lain is more important at this moment. I have to do what's best as her father. I need to put in the effort to make sure they accept me, instead of rejecting me as a freak.

"Oh."

As soon as I thought this, Lady Douve appeared, indicating that my plan would definitely fail.

"I see you'll be participating in the training, Sansui."

"Yes. In order to be worthy of serving as your bodyguard…"

“Douve… Surely, you understand. It’s part of Sansui’s duty to participate. Even you mustn’t keep him from doing so.”

Lady Arte wasn’t one to indulge Lady Douve. Evidently thinking that Lady Douve might try to keep me from participating out of concern for her bodyguard, Lady Arte preempts any attempt from doing so on her part.

“That goes without saying, Mother. However, I do need to make sure he understands something.”

“In what sense?”

“Sansui, you defeated my father and brother to become my bodyguard.”

Lady Douve had a very malicious smile on her face. Even without reading her presence, I could tell she was scheming.

“Having defeated the Lord and the heir apparent, surely you wouldn’t let your concern for mere soldiers allow you to lose to them, would you?”

As I feared. Once she said that, I couldn’t afford to hold back. If this was simply training, then there was no problem with beating them. They may wind up fearing me, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing…

Or so I told myself. I may have spent my time training away from the mortal world, but it didn’t take a lot of thought to know how this would end, and I had no choice but to do it. This was now part of my job.

“Of course, Lady Douve. I, Sansui Shirokuro, on my Master Suiboku’s honor, will do my best.”

“Then show it with results. Show that you are worthy of being my bodyguard.”

Great. A fight I was better off losing had become a must-win situation, thanks to Lady Douve’s words…

I cursed the unfairness of the world as I stepped onto the training ground.

“You’re Shirokuro Sansui, Lady Douve’s new bodyguard?”

“Yes.”

In front of me was a large soldier holding a training sword. There were a few pronounced wrinkles on his features, but the scars were more visible, making him look the part of a skilled veteran. No doubt he’d faced scores of battles.

“I know your situation, but I won’t do you any favors. It goes without saying, but attack me without resorting to your Rare Art. This is a test of your sword.”

“Understood.”

Even training swords hurt when they hit. They can even break bones. Still, the soldier in front of me faced me without fear.

“…Also. This is not training for swordsmanship. It’s training for combat. What you need to do is defeat me. Punches, kicks, it doesn’t matter what you use. I don’t know what sort of techniques you’ve learned until now, but I will assume you have others. Understood?”

“Yes.”

He has the bearing and the commitment, the experience and accomplishments. Confidence and pride. He's a very likable man, and someone who shouldn't be treated lightly. That is why I cursed my fate, and the fact that I had to defeat him.

"...Very well."

He gave no warning before going into a high stance and bringing his sword down at me. Without any hesitation, he attacked with a blow that could very well kill an unskilled opponent. Dying in training was, perhaps, just proof of a lack of ability. He seemed to suggest that in his attitude.

House Sepaeda isn't indulgent, nor are its soldiers. Without a single exception, they've all lived a hard, intense life. With that in mind, I also acted.

"Hah!"

The skilled veteran let out the cry. I silently stepped in and avoided the attack. Taking advantage of the shift in his center of gravity, I strike up at his jaw with my palm.

"Guh!"

He probably didn't even recognize what had happened.

When attacked by an opponent he wasn't particularly cautious about, from an angle he didn't see, into a weak point, even the most experienced warrior wouldn't be able to stay upright.

"Since he mentioned I could use my hands, I used my hands."

As my opponent's large body collapsed, I placed myself under him to support him, and laid him gently onto the ground.

Having defeated one of the stronger men present with ease, those around me stare in surprise.

"...Sansui."

"Yes, m'lady!"

On the other hand, Lady Douve's judgment was harsh.

"I couldn't see what you were doing. Next time, defeat them in a way so I can tell what happened."

"My apologies."

Appearing very bored and very unhappy, she laid out her complaints. Wait, why was she demanding that I defeat warriors pledged to her family in a flashy and easy to see way? Would the people of this house really swear loyalty to her?

"Sansui!"

"Yes, milady?"

"...Did you use your Rare Art?"

"No, I haven't."

"Can you swear upon that?"

"I swear upon my Master's honor."

"..."

Having witnessed something difficult to accept, Her Mothership looks upon me with suspicion. She wondered if I had broken my word and used

my Rare Art. However, all I had done was defeat him with an open-handed blow. I hadn't used any Immortal Arts.

"Lady Arte."

With Lady Arte unable to put aside her suspicion, the other warriors speak up. Their expressions were harsh and they pointed a great deal of hostility in my direction.

"Respectfully, this is our training. Please calm yourself."

"...However."

"Even if Lady Douve's new bodyguard made use of his Rare Art, the fault is on our end for not detecting it, and that this man is that clever."

With that, they point their swords in my direction.

"Please watch over the proceedings with Lady Douve."

Their attitude was clearly that they would demonstrate with their swords. Lady Arte evidently chose to respect that and withdrew her words. And, of course, I wound up having to fight yet again. This was no longer practice or training. The air in the training grounds had changed.

"Shirokuro Sansui, was it? Come face me."

"Yes, of course."

The man who stepped up was another scarred soldier. He seemed a bit younger than the previous veteran. Physically, he might have been stronger. As silence filled the space, he then came at me.

"Raaaah!"

My physical abilities weren't that particularly impressive. I'm more capable than I look, but I wasn't as strong as the man in front of me. If I went on the defensive, he'd simply overwhelm me. However, I couldn't take him down in a single blow. Not because the opponent was on guard, but because of Lady Douve's disapproval.

"Fu!"

I struck as I dodged. The sword in my hand was a dull training weapon, but it was still a lump of metal. I used it to strike my opponent's arm. His arm doesn't break, thanks to his training, but it's still enough to leave a bruise.

"Mrraagh!"

The expected counterattack. Again, I dodge and strike.

"Guh... Nrrrgh!"

"Fu!"

It was a very odd battle. Those around us were initially tense, but eventually began to show concern, ending with a certain amount of fear.

"...Mother, this is all rather disappointing. I knew Sansui was strong, but for him to be this much stronger than them..."

"...Douve, just where did you find this swordsman?"

"On the road to the capital, mother."

I wasn't moving at a speed my opponent couldn't follow. Nor was I overwhelming him with repeated attacks. I was simply dodging by reading the course of the swings directed at me, and attacking as I dodged.

“Guh… Grr… Why, why can… Why can you so perfectly dodge my attacks…?”

“I am following my Master’s teachings.”

“You’re skilled… But… I can’t afford to lose!”

My opponent isn’t a fool. He staggers his timing and mixes in feints in an attempt to draw me into a mistake. However, none of those feints work. I only respond to his actual attack, hitting him each time he strikes. From Lady Douve’s perspective, it must have looked like I was beating up on him, but that was, in fact, evidence that I far outstripped him in skill.

“Raaaagh!”

The soldier tried desperately to keep up with my immeasurable presence. Having decided I’d demonstrated enough, I landed a final attack upon him.

“…Guh!”

“This is it.”

A blow to the head. Not one sufficient to render him unconscious, but enough to stun him. No matter how much his commitment, he couldn’t stay standing.

“Y-You… Could have killed me if you wished… Rather, you held back not to kill me…”

“This is still training, after all.”

“You mean to say I’m not even worth killing…!”

“…I wouldn’t recommend you keep speaking.”

Perhaps it would have been better to knock him out. As I considered that, I waited for my next opponent.

A while later, the training ground was covered in fresh blood. The soldiers that had been training there had either been sent to the infirmary or accompanied other soldiers to it.

As for me, I was kneeling before Lady Douve and Lady Arte, not a scratch on me.

“Sansui.”

“Ma’am.”

“What did you think of my House’s soldiers?”

It had only been a series of one on one matches, but they had effectively been wiped out. Even then, Lady Douve decided to ask a cruel question, as though to drive home the point to Her Mothership, who sat in shock next to her.

“They are loyal and brave.”

“Yes… They challenged an opponent they knew they couldn’t beat without fear. And their teamwork in taking their fallen comrades to the mystics was impressive. Don’t you agree, Mother?”

Her Mothership looked upon me with horror. She couldn’t believe that her retainers, who had been engaged in intense training just moments before, had been thoroughly beaten by a child. Despite the fact it appeared

I hadn’t used my Rare Art, and had just fought one on one, I hadn’t shown any sign of struggling.

That I continued to adopt a loyal attitude toward Lady Douve made her look at me as though I were some sort of monster. The truth is, having been alive for over five hundred years, I suppose I was a monster of sorts.

“Well… Well done.”

As the lady of a martial house, she mustered her pride and offered me her praise. She couldn’t quite restrain her trembling, but that was understandable. It’d be odder if she could look at the situation and think of me as simply being a genius. Her Mothership thoroughly regretted underestimating me.

“You honor me.”

Of course, I was also regretting the outcome. Whatever Lady Douve’s remarks, I didn’t expect to fight nearly half the soldiers present. Did I really need to do this with people who had simply been doing their best? It’s not as though they were my enemies. We all served the same house.

I really couldn’t understand why it was necessary to go this far in the course of training. It’s true that I had trained because I was hoping to become strong, but it wasn’t because I wanted to do something like this. I suppose this is what it means to raise a child, to work, to serve a noble house…

“Lady Arte! Lady Arte!”

As I thought over such things, Blois breathlessly leads a man into the training grounds. He was a man a bit too old to be in active service, a man just on the edge of old age.

“I have brought my master.”

“Ohh, thank you for coming!”

It seems he’s an aged hero who had retired to a life of instruction. His eyes are sharp, and his gait is steady. More than anything, his hands are thickly calloused, showing years of training.

“Sansui, this gentleman is a swordsman who has long served House Sepaeda.”

“Lady Arte, you need not flatter me so… It seems this young man is my opponent.”

“Yes. I’m afraid all the others have…”

“My apologies, Lady Arte. It is all due to my failures as a teacher.”

Drawing the weapon at his hip, a rapier like the one Blois wields, he turns the tip toward me.

“Allow me to take responsibility.”

Seeing his stance, I almost crack a smile. The soldiers weren’t weak, but compared to their physical strength, their skills were a bit lacking. By contrast, the aged hero’s skill was impressive. In a short match, one on one, he was, perhaps, stronger than anyone else I’d met.

“Very well, let’s begin.”

I dropped into a stance and readied my sword. It seemed my opponent was able to read my own skill in turn, and slowly closed the distance. His rapier's tip wavered, trying to invite me into committing.

I gazed at it, waiting for the attack...

"I yield!"

As I waited, the aged hero, having realized my ability, sheathed his sword and admitted defeat.

It seems he really did recognize the gap in skill.

"M-Master?!"

Blois was in a panic. Lady Arte stared in shock. Lady Douve was disappointed.

"Blois...and Lady Arte. My skill is no match for this gentleman."

"Y-You admit this without so much as crossing blades?!"

"Yes. He is at that great of a height."

And then the old gentleman bowed his head to me.

"Please, take this old man as your apprentice!"

"...W-Well, I'm afraid I haven't been given permission by my Master... Please, forgive me."

"Th-Then! Please, tell me... Just how much training, what sort of training do you need to do to reach your heights?!"

And I'm afraid I could only answer one way.

"W-With... Practice swings."

Afterword

I would like to sincerely thank you for picking up the third volume of “The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman.”

When volume 1 came out, I thought, ‘My first published work, awesome!’ but also worried that it might be my one and only volume. The fact that I’ve been able to continue with a volume 2, and now a volume 3, is all thanks to you, the reader.

I’ll continue to do my best to meet the expectations of my readers and entertain the people who buy my books.

In this volume Sansui doesn’t do much and has progressed from the least interesting master swordsman to being a swordsman who doesn’t care about appearances, a swordsman without a presence. As the story progresses and the world gets larger, it’s perhaps unavoidable that Sansui, a single swordsman, would end up being less important.

However, the title of this work is still “The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman.” To make up for his lack of activity in the book, I’ve added some stories about his time in the Sepaeda lands.

There’s quite a few things that haven’t been directly touched on in the main story, so I’d like to keep adding these stories as the opportunity allows.

Now, those of you who have purchased this volume are probably already aware, but the first volume of the manga, which started with the publication of volume 1 of the novel, will be coming out at the same time as this volume.

The work drawn by Appe is really great, so I’d appreciate it if you’d pick that up as well.

I’d like to thank Shiso-sensei for doing the illustrations, including the cover art, and my managing editors at PASH!, Egawa and Kondo. I look forward to continuing our work together.

Akashi

Bonus Short Story

True Nature

Sansui Shirokuro, the newly hired bodyguard of Douve, daughter of the main House of Sepaeda… A young swordsman with training in a heretofore unknown Rare Art called the Immortal Arts and incredible swordsmanship… A skilled warrior who secured his place by showing his ability to the Lord Sepaeda and his heir…

“My dear. Just what are you thinking, assigning that child to protect Douve?”

However, there’s no reason that Douve’s mother, Arte Sepaeda, wouldn’t be suspicious of the blatantly odd Sansui. When her husband, Lord Sepaeda, returned to their lands, she wasted no time in confronting him about it.

“It’s her wish, and I can hardly contradict her. Furthermore, I believe you already tested him. To suspect him without cause invites questions into your own character.”

Arte Sepaeda had already administered a test for Sansui, and Sansui had passed that test. To suspect him in spite of that shows far too little consideration for him.

“That’s not the issue. There is something odd about that child.”

Sansui has the skill to be a bodyguard. That’s certainly without question, but it’s also beyond reason. He’s simply too strong. There’s a limit to being extraordinary, after all. Combined with the fact that his origins are murky, putting him close by still seems to be a risk. While not dismissing her sense of danger, Lord Sepaeda sincerely answers his wife’s concern.

“You’re right, I agree with that. But what is it you want to do? Kill him, perhaps? How do we kill a swordsman of that caliber? And it would be one thing to succeed, but if we fail, do you have any idea what would happen then?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to kill him…”

“Then fire him? No doubt he’ll take it calmly, but that means we can’t do anything if he falls into the employ of one of our political rivals.”

He’s too powerful and too suspicious, but his strength makes him too dangerous to let go. Arte had no counterarguments for her husband’s logic.

“Still, your concerns are perfectly understandable. I’ll leave investigating him to you. But whatever you do, avoid making rash decisions and making an enemy of him. In particular, don’t do anything to the baby, Lain. Don’t take her hostage or use her for leverage. That is one point I won’t forgive, even from you.”

No matter how suspicious, to punish a retainer for no justifiable reason or to involve their family was a line no noble should cross. As for involving a baby, that’s the sort of thing that would cost them the trust of everyone around them.

“Focus on investigating. You can do whatever you need to for that. Employ as many as you need to.”

“Very well. I will find out all there is to know about that child.”

Armed with permission from her husband, Arte Sepaeda first tried to discover where Sansui had come from. An unknown rare art called the Immortal Arts, and an unparalleled skill in swordsmanship... She sought to find the country where he had learned those things.

But it produced little in the way of results. The servants tasked by Arte sent out investigators in every direction, but none of them could find any specific information.

“My Lady, my sincere apologies. Given how much he stands out, we thought we could trace his steps. However, we haven’t been able to find anything.”

Putting Lain aside, Sansui is clearly from outside the kingdom, and he met Douve near the royal capital. As such it meant he must have come to the capital, which is near the center of the Arcana Kingdom, by traveling through one of the territories of the Four Great Houses.

However, the reality is that this assumption was wrong. Sansui had been living in the deep woods near the capital since before the founding of the Arcana Kingdom. Since all he did was live in those woods, there was no path of his to trace.

“It is of no consequence. No doubt he must have concealed himself on the way to the capital. His Rare Art, after all, is well suited for travel, which must have let him approach the capital without being seen.”

Douve’s mother wasn’t particularly concerned by this. This was well within her expected parameters. The fact that he was traveling in secret makes her suspect he has something to hide. However, this just raised more questions without providing any answers. It’s not any basis for taking action against Sansui.

“Then how is Sansui spending his time at the estate?”

“Well…”

Since Sansui is living within Sepaeda Manor, it should be easy enough to figure this out. After all, the wife of the lord of the manor is directly issuing the orders, so there’s no way for him to hide.

“It need not be suspicious activity. If we can grasp his preferences in his food or his daily routine, that will give us hints as to his weaknesses and interests.”

“M-My Lady... How do I phrase this... In the course of our investigations we discovered something quite remarkable.”

“And that is?”

The steward tasked with summarizing the findings read out its contents.

“He wakes with the dawn and practices his sword swings outside with his wooden sword.”

“Quite studious.”

“At Lady Douve’s rise, he returns to the estate and begins guarding her.”

“I see. That is to be commended.”

“After which he follows Lady Douve around, accompanying her wherever she goes.”

“As Douve is doing as she ought to do, I have no complaints there, either.”

“He goes to meet the baby, Lain, when Lady Douve is dining or bathing.”

“I see he has some recognition of his duties as a father.”

“He appears to become very sleepy at sunset, and immediately goes to sleep once Lady Douve is abed.”

“…And?”

Based on the report, all he’s doing is working. He evidently has no hobbies and is very dedicated, but so what?

“We’ve had Shirokuro Sansui under constant surveillance for the last week…”

“Stop holding back and get to the point.”

“He hasn’t eaten a single bite, nor has he excreted anything.”

“Of course that’s not the case!”

Perhaps if it had been a day or two, but he’d surely he’d have fallen ill if he had been fasting for an entire week. The most reasonable explanation is that he’s hiding his meals and his excretions.

However, there’s no way that House Sepaeda’s steward wouldn’t have checked for such a thing. Having several observers keeping a constant eye on him in shifts, they would have been watching him like a hawk. That means that the only conclusion is that he does not, in fact, eat, drink, or excrete.

“Perhaps he’s hiding his eating and does it when he’s supposed to be sleeping?”

“We checked for any crumbs or the like, but we could not find any, and there’s not exactly any room to hide food in those clothes. Further, there’d be no way for him to hide his excretions…”

The more they look into him, the more they find that he’s simply inexplicable. They don’t know where he came from, and they don’t know why he doesn’t need to eat, drink, or excrete anything. But that’s still not a reason to get rid of him.

“Shirokuro Sansui…Just who is he…”

While the investigations continued after this, the situation didn’t change. Sansui continued his life without eating, drinking, or excreting for the next several years.

Several years after Sansui’s hiring by House Sepaeda…

Having read the letter that her husband, now retired, sent from the capital, Arte felt the strength drain from her limbs and a shudder run up her spine.

“To my dearest wife. We recently learned of Sansui’s true nature, so I am writing to put the questions that have plagued you for the last few years at rest.”

“It appears that the Immortal Arts that Sansui practices, once acquired, make their wielder literally immortal, in that they stop aging completely.”

“This is information from the Legendary Sword Eckesachs, the Sacred Treasure that House Batterabbe acquired, making it extremely credible. It appears the previous owner of Eckesachs was Sansui’s master, Suiboku.”

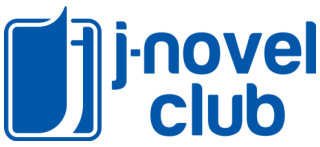
“The man Sansui who has continually noted is his superior, Suiboku, is evidently a swordsman with several thousand years of training under his belt, and Sansui himself spent five hundred years learning under Suiboku.”

“The notion that he has been alive longer than the Arcana Kingdom has been in existence would ordinarily be so absurd as to not even provoke derisive laughter, but those who have seen Sansui’s skill will surely find this explanation to be convincing.”

“I have heard that Immortals do not burn when set on fire and do not drown when submerged in water, but considering that they do not require any food or drink and have been freed from aging, they are evidently an even more ludicrous existence than I imagined.”

“Just…What does this even mean?”

Even once his true nature is revealed, the life of an Immortal is hardly simpler than it appears. For the studiously serious Arte, Sansui remained an inexplicable monster.



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The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman: Volume 3
by Rokurou Akashi
Translated by Noboru Akimoto
Edited by William Haggard

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by PASH! Books
This English edition is published by arrangement with PASH! Books, Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2020

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